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Secrets of an art dealer

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SECRETS OF AN
ART DEALER

JAMES HENRY DUVEEN



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THEORY OF VIBRATIONS

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
CHICAGO
PRESS

To
THAT BEING WHICH OCCURS
ONLY ONCE IN LIFE
A MOTHER

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
PRESS
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60607
U.S.A.

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SECRETS OF AN ART DEALER

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CHAPTER I

REMAKING A RELIQUARY FOR £30,000

THE Combes law which, at a stroke, converted all the ecclesiastical treasures of France into State property, was one of those upheavals which, like the War, brought objects into the art markets of the world which had long been thought quite safe from any chance of dispersal. Thirty odd years ago no one dreamed that such wonderful goldsmiths' work, pictures and other treasures, would ever be freed from the "dead hand," and the result was startling. The Loi Combes taught me that even the Church would "steal" its own property rather than allow it to fall into the hands of the State despoilers. Priests, devout citizens, not quite so devout or so respectable ladies and a host of hangers-on intrigued and conspired one against the other, linked only by the common trait of feverish greed.

As I was motoring with an artist friend on the Continent I happened to be amongst the first to be caught up into this maelstrom: I say "motoring," for although we were aiming for the Riviera we had only got one third of the way in ten days! We could have walked it faster, but those were the days when

tyres were only "guaranteed" for about 500 miles and the motorist spent more time under his car than in it.

Near Auxerre Sydney Watson, my companion, sat down on a roadside bank and hitched up his elegant trousers. He paid no attention at all to a small crowd of loafers and children who goggled alternately at him and me.

"My dear Duveen," he exclaimed, "the more I see of motor cars the more I congratulate myself I know nothing about them! Especially in this tropical heat."

Kneeling in the dust with the sweat trickling down my face, and wrestling with a burst tyre, I only just avoided losing my temper. I must have looked a Harry Tate figure, clad in—I regret to say—a suit of dark purple leather. Before I could reply a large open car arrived in a cloud of dust, passed us and stopped.

"Any help?" exclaimed a slim and very sleek-looking dark-haired man who got out. In those days you always proffered assistance to motorists in trouble. As I got to my feet, the stranger said, "*C'est toi, Duveen!* But how fortunate: the very man I could have wished for!"

Removing his goggles, he wrung my hand and then whispered: "Your friend—he is in business with you?"

"No," I replied, mopping my face. "He is not. What is more, he doesn't talk much French."

It was M. Gaspard, a dealer in a very small way

whom I had known some time, but not intimately enough for him to "thou" me so impertinently! He looked greatly relieved.

"A question of big business, very big," he muttered mysteriously. "In a church on the other side of Auxerre there is a wonderful ninth century old reliquary with lovely enamelling. Ah, superb, my friend! I think it is gold, but it may be silver gilt. That is of no account, as you know. The priest to whom it belongs wants to find a rich American buyer, so that his influential relatives—and the State—don't get to hear about it."

I felt a decided twinge of interest. This sort of thing was occurring everywhere and, as it happened, a short while earlier a London collector had asked me to try and get him a really fine mediaeval reliquary.

"What does the fellow want?" I asked.

Gaspard hesitated for a moment: his dark eyes glanced away from me and instinctively I knew he was going to fence. But his next words surprised me, for France was (and is) the paradise of secret-commission hunters and I imagined he would bargain with me for the price of his introduction.

"The priest won't mention any sum," he replied. "And he's sharp, too. He wants me to interest several people and hopes to get them to bid against each other."

"Funny way of keeping the deal secret!" I exclaimed.

"Well, he is an old fool, really, and I'm going to put one over on him. I had an idea of faking an

auction with a few of my pals and getting the reliquary cheap for myself. *Nom d'un chien!*" His eyes lighted up and he caught me by the lapel. "Duveen! *The* idea! Why not let's all go right away? I'll introduce you as a great English buyer and my friends here"—he waved an arm at the car—"can chip in with a bid or two? The old chap knows none of them."

All this seemed very sudden, but then in art-dealing things do happen like that, and the dealer who seizes his opportunity often reaps a rich reward.

"And the ladies?" I asked, already half convinced.

"Allow me to introduce you," he said, leading me forward. "This is the great Jack Duveen—here is 'Toinette and this is Yvonne. M. Calbert and M. Rochin, two of my oldest friends."

At once I placed "ladies" who were introduced by Christian names only, but it wasn't my affair. When they removed goggles and motor veils I was surprised to find how young and extraordinarily good-looking they were! "Snappy" is the modern and very apt word. Calbert was a deputy and Rochin a notary. Sydney Watson was also introduced, the puncture was mended and a few miles up the road Gaspard insisted we should join them in a picnic lunch which only a Frenchwoman could have produced. He outlined the priest's characteristics, went into raptures over the reliquary and then said, slyly:

"If he is as fond of his wines as he is of the ladies, we should have an easy job with him. Trust me, Duveen, either you or I are going to get that reliquary at the right price!"

"*Soit!*" said I. "I'm with you. At any rate we should have a very pleasant time."

We arranged that, in order to avoid suspicion, we should stay the night in Auxerre at different hotels. I was to figure as the very great buyer, but Watson refused to have anything to do with the business.

"Antiques don't interest me," he explained, "and it is really far too hot for motoring. I'll laze about in Auxerre while you attend to your affairs."

It was just as well, because at about eleven o'clock next day the Curé arrived, accompanied by Gaspard. After a ceremonious introduction and a great deal of talk I was invited to lunch: it appeared that Calbert, Rochin and their "wives" would also be there! Gaspard drove me to the Presbytery which was almost in sight of the famous little town of Chablis that gives its name to the prince of white wines. The Vicarage lay at the foot of a gentle hillside against which acres of vines, with their grapes already ripe, formed a soft tapestry of green. The Curé was on the steps to receive us, and behind him I caught a glimpse of a forbidding-looking housekeeper of the peasant type. The rest of the party had already arrived, and we were formally "introduced," and I was impressed by Gaspard's knowledge of psychology when I watched the old man's pleasure and his witty conversation with the two girls.

"Before we sit down to table," he exclaimed, "you must do me the honour of trying my own special *apéritif*. It is made from a recipe, *mes amis*,

which has been in our family since the fifteenth century!" As we sipped the velvety wine, he added with a twinkle in his eye: "A liqueur for a virgin!"

Judging from the taste that it was fairly harmless, I drank another glass and presently our host led the way into a long and deliciously cool dining-room containing a table laid with one of those rare and valuable damask cloths on which the design stands out like silk. The dinner set was in white and gold; charming early nineteenth century porcelain, and the cut glass, silver and flowers delighted the eye. In the whole and in detail, the result spoke well for the good taste of this interesting old *bon-vivant*.

As course succeeded course—brook trout, a pair of marvellous capons, salads followed by peaches from the Vicarage garden—the party grew not only friendly but a trifle hilarious. On the question of wines, the Curé gave us a little lecture.

"Here you will only get white," he cried, "and please note that I do not call it Chablis. They sell 'Chablis' now in every restaurant, and so I will not profane this wine with that name. This is what we *used* to call Chablis! A wine for princes and for commoners with real taste!"

He made a little bow towards his upheld glass and we sipped with reverence. Personally I do not drink much although, when I am put to it, I can hold my own with the next man, but this Chablis was like liquid sunshine. I have rarely tasted its equal. Presently, when the dessert was on the table, the Curé signed to the housekeeper to bring coffee and liqueurs.

Green and gold and ruby red, each guest chose which he preferred from this rainbow of colours. The Curé then produced another bottle and turned to me, laying a hand on my arm.

"Gaspard tells me you like wine in moderation, but I sincerely hope you will honour me by trying this liqueur. It is so delicate that you might drink half a bottle and come to no harm. Allow me, please!"

He poured into my glass a light, golden wine which, though I could not "place" it, had undoubtedly a very fine bouquet. I had absorbed two or three little glasses of this when M. le Curé got to his feet.

"Alas, that we should have to come now to business! I will go and fetch the holy relic which is the object of your journey."

Gaspard winked at me just as he returned holding a small leather case, worn and time-stained.

"Before I open this," said the Curé with *empressment*, "I must tell you that this reliquary is of the very greatest importance. It has been kept in the same iron chest for many centuries and the tradition is that it belonged to Charlemagne himself." He paused for a moment. "For family reasons it cannot be sent to a public auction, as I have already explained to M. Gaspard, but I have invited you here to-day so that you may bid exactly as if at an auction. That is much more pleasant and is equally fair."

There was a murmur of approval.

"*L'honneur aux dames!*" exclaimed the Curé, opening the leather case. "Will the ladies please examine

the treasure first. After you have all looked at it, we will commence the bidding."

At that moment he saw that my glass was empty.

"Ah, *mon cher* M. Duveen! What has the pride of my family done to you? An empty glass: impossible!"

"Well, as a matter of fact I find it a shade too sweet."

"Aha? Very well, then. After the sweet you must just wash your mouth out with a little of my *marc*. There! Swallow it right off: it can't do you a mite of harm."

That *marc* was certainly "sharp" enough: it nearly choked me. I have always understood that *marc* is the last pressings of the grapes and is more or less harmless, but this stuff must have been blended with something more potent because, within five minutes, my head began to go round. In turn, the reliquary came round to me, and in spite of a slight mistiness in front of my eyes I was quite able to estimate its value. 'Not very interesting,' I thought, 'but worth buying at 10,000 francs. Certainly not more than £400. Was this the thing Gaspard had got so excited about?'

While my head steadily became worse, the Curé was holding forth on the merits of this reliquary.

"I have thought of a manner of sale which will be quite fair to everybody," he declaimed. "I suggest each bidder writes down his bid and encloses it in an envelope. The highest bidder gets the reliquary."

This, of course, was auction by tender, and would

have been fair enough if the bidders had been real. Gaspard and I knew they were not. What was going to happen I had not the slightest idea, because every moment the room seemed to swim round me more swiftly, so to avoid argument I agreed to this wild idea. Whilst the Curé's back was turned for a moment, Gaspard leaned across to me and whispered:

"What are you going to write?"

"Seven thousand," I muttered.

I calculated to give the odd 3,000 francs as *douceurs* to the "assistants." Gaspard got up and moved round the table: he seemed to be behaving rather oddly.

Then came the Curé's voice.

"*Faites vos offres, messieurs!*"

Just like the roulette tables at Monte Carlo, thought I. I was given a scrap of paper and carefully wrote "*Sept mille. J. H. Duveen.*" Calbert, Rochin and Gaspard were also scribbling their offers, and the four were sealed in envelopes and handed to the Curé. With an important air he opened them one by one and read:

"M. Calbert—five thousand, five hundred pounds."
Pounds? Was the man crazy?

"M. Rochin—five thousand pounds."

"M. Gaspard—six thousand one hundred pounds."

"M. Duveen—ah! *mon cher*—you have it! M. Duveen, seven thousand pounds!"

There was applause and someone was clapping me on the back, which sent agonising pains through

my head. Yet all the time I wanted to laugh: it was ridiculous.

"Seven thousand *francs*, not pounds," I managed to say, cutting across cries of "What courage!" "He knows a good thing!"

Quite suddenly a silence fell and again I said, as loudly as I could, "Seven thousand *francs*, M. le Curé."

Gaspard got up and went over to the old man, and the rest all seemed to be leaning over and whispering together. At last the Curé turned to me.

"Come, my friend, I hope my good wine has not affected you? Please look at this bit of paper. There is your own offer: '*£ Sept mille.*' There can't be any mistake."

There was certainly a "£" in front of the words, but I had never put it there. Then, to make my dawning suspicions certain, Gaspard came up and said:

"My dear fellow: you yourself told me you were bidding seven thousand pounds!"

"Yes," bleated Rochin, the notary, "we all bid in pounds because M. le Curé suggested it."

Though my head swam, my inner consciousness was quite clear. I knew that this infernal Gaspard and the Curé were "putting over a swift one." They had either drugged or so mixed my liquor as to put me out of action and were relying on half a dozen witnesses to blackmail me into consent of a quite ridiculous bid.

"I did *not* write pounds," I heard myself saying.

"I only wrote seven thousand and, anyway, who in France would dream of writing in pounds?"

At this moment a wave of nausea overtook me: everything seemed to go black in front of my eyes. If only I could get rid of this ghastly turning, swinging sensation, I should be all right. Voices came faintly to me as from a distance.

"Of course he wrote pounds! He is trying to swindle you, M. le Curé!"

Some time later I found myself in the garden; over that part of the story let me draw a merciful veil. Later Gaspard himself led me back to the sitting-room, though all I wanted was somewhere to lie down and rest. After half an hour the vertigo left me, and I became more or less normal once again. They all came into the sitting-room, and the business recommenced. Gaspard came over and whispered:

"You can't let me down, Duveen. I'm known here and the scandal will ruin me!"

"I am not going to be swindled," cut in the Curé, puffing out his rubicund cheeks like a turkey-cock. "Everyone here has seen the bid and has examined the writing. Seven thousand pounds it was, without any doubt at all."

As a matter of fact, I was pretty awkwardly situated, because in France they have drastic regulations concerning foreigners who owe Frenchmen money. They can attach your property, your car, your person, and—with these witnesses against me—I should have the devil of a time to prove the affair a put-up job. Once again Gaspard took me aside.

"Give the old man a cheque," he whispered.
"You can stop it immediately afterwards."

I snatched at an easy way out of the dilemma.

"Fill it in," I groaned, "and I'll sign anything."

Gaspard took my cheque book and gave me the slip to sign. I began to write when Gaspard said "You're making a mistake. You are drunk, my boy. You've written an M instead of an H. This is your signature." He waved in front of me the slip which I had already signed. He tore up the cheque, made out another, gave it to me, and as I wrote there was an audible sigh of relief from those present. Still the Curé was not satisfied.

"After all that has happened I will only deliver the reliquary when the cheque has been met!" he announced.

That ended the business for the day. Gaspard drove me back to my hotel, where I poured out my woes to Sydney Watson. He was callous enough to laugh but, seeing how hard hit I was, offered to help me in any way he could. He promised to go over with me to the Presbytery next day and beard this "antiquarian."

"I can't get to the bottom of it," he said. "It looks as if Gaspard tried to put one over on his own with your help and then, when he found you were half doped, switched round and did a deal with the Curé instead."

At the Presbytery we found the old man in the garden amongst his roses; he did not seem pleased to see us.

"I'm afraid I cannot talk business, M'sieur," he said, "except in the presence of my lawyer."

Watson caught my eye: his French was good enough to grasp the sense of the Curé's remark. In that glance I read, "*Bluff!*"

"Very well, M. le Curé," I remarked, "I shall be happy to meet your lawyer after I have referred the whole matter to the British Ambassador in Paris. I have no doubt that the French Government will show great interest in your Church reliquary."

The priest made a gesture of dissent: he was quite obviously perturbed.

"My *avocat* says I have a perfectly sound contract. He made me send a proper receipt to your London address to put the affair in order."

"What if I stop the cheque?"

"You couldn't—I happen to know that no one has sent a telegram to London since yesterday," he snapped. "And a friend of mine has already reached London: he is probably cashing your cheque at this very moment!"

This showed up the priest in quite a different light from the benign old gentleman who was supposed to be quite ignorant of the wicked ways of the business world!

"Won't you give me an acquittal from the whole affair?" I pleaded. "Don't you see that I was—well, a bit muddled when I made that bid of seven thousand francs?"

"*Pounds!* No, the deal goes through!"

At last I pulled out my ace of trumps. He and

Gaspard and all the rascally lot of them had been in "cahoots" to swindle me, but the curtain must now fall!

"No it doesn't," I murmured. "My written bid happens to be signed 'J. H. Duveen' and the bank will not honour that. The firm's cheques are always signed 'J. M. Duveen & Son.' I'm afraid your friend will have crossed the Channel for nothing!"

You should have seen that old man's face! It grew crimson, then purple. He struggled to speak. His hands pawed the air and at the sight of his utter defeat I felt a pang of pity. But, after all, the old devil had tried a bare-faced swindle and had very nearly got away with £7,000!

"I suggest a glass of your own special liqueur," I said. "Or maybe of your very potent *marc*!"

"I—I—it is an outrage——" he stammered, but I cut him short.

"Before I leave I require from you a few words on a piece of paper. I want a written assurance that unforeseen circumstances have prevented you selling this 'too-marvellous' reliquary to me. Failing that, I shall have recourse to my Ambassador!"

M. le Curé was beaten. He crumpled up. Three minutes later, in the sitting-room I remembered too well, he was writing with a shaking hand the words which acquitted me of further financial liability regarding the "reliquary of Charlemagne." Without a word Watson and I bowed ourselves out of the room. Three days later I was talking to my firm's bank manager in London and was asking for a

description of the man who had presented a wrongly signed cheque for £7,000.

"Middle height, dark, with sleek, smooth hair and rather over-dressed," said the manager. "He was wearing a large enamelled ring on his right hand. I had to interview him myself before he would be convinced. Of course, we didn't cash the cheque. What was the story behind it, Mr. Duveen?"

Well, here it is. He had described M. Gaspard, that too-clever dealer, like a Bow Street policeman with ten years' experience!

This "Chablis" reliquary is probably the most "miraculous" ever produced by the antique trade, and its subsequent adventures are interesting as going to show how a new "history" can be grafted on to an object which, originally moderately good, gradually emerges as one of the world's artistic wonders. I came across it not very long afterwards in the showroom of M. Tigre, one of the most respected antiquaries of Paris.

"Monsieur Jacques," he said, bringing the reliquary out of its case, "I want to show you something both rare and beautiful. I happen to know that for many centuries this lay hidden; it formed part of a great Church treasure. If you think you can find a client, I will let you have it for 20,000 francs."

Its price had doubled during the interval! Knowing far more of its history than this charming antiquary and not wishing to hurt his feelings by disclosing the episode of M. le Curé near Auxerre, I explained

that I thought it hardly beautiful or important enough to be worth £800. He laughed and laid an affectionate hand on my shoulder.

"Ah, *mon cher*! You are still young at the game. You have no idea of the possibilities of this wonderful piece!"

At the time I was puzzled by his tone, not realising in the least how time would prove him right. Some months later I was commissioned to obtain a really good reliquary, but journeys abroad on this and other business brought no result. It was the heyday of that golden age in the annals of art dealing, when American multi-millionaires vied with one another in placing their cheque books at the disposal of their many agents in search of artistic treasures, and my client had stipulated that the reliquary he wanted must be richly enamelled, brilliant in colouring and, if possible, must be set with precious stones. That kind of thing could not be picked up too easily. And then the miracle happened! One afternoon in Paris I happened to be passing the house of that very famous Monsieur André, père, the king of restorers of a previous generation. Suddenly came a very energetic young man—member of a famous firm of art dealers—who hurried off as though the devil were behind him. That looked interesting to me, so I entered the studio and saw little André himself. His back was turned towards me.

"How goes it?" I exclaimed, clapping him on the shoulders. "Doing a good 'deal' with that young fellow?"

André whipped round, surprise and something like terror on his face, and at that moment I caught sight of the "Chablis" reliquary again. Now it was about five times as big as when I had last seen it, and moreover it exactly fulfilled the requirements of my wealthy client. Richly enamelled, important, studded with precious stones, it looked worthy of Cellini himself! All this I absorbed in one lightning glance, but there was more to come. Old André watched my face anxiously: he knew that my trained eye would always remember this extraordinary piece, but my mind was moving even more quickly than his.

"He's a lucky fellow to get hold of a thing like that!" I murmured. "I never saw anything so beautiful."

"Ah, *oui*," stammered André. "*C'est une merveille, n'est-ce pas ?*"

He tried to lift the reliquary off the table on which it stood, but it came apart in his hands and the top portion fell to the floor where, luckily, a rug prevented much damage. Before he could move, I had picked it up and began admiring it: lots of the little finishing touches in the faking were not complete! The top showed patches where various styles of *patina*, (that age-old look caused by the passage of centuries), had been experimentally tried. As some of this camouflage was even now scarcely dry, and in the background stood sundry bottles on a table by the window, it was obvious what had caused a visit to the shop by so illustrious and busy an art

dealer. The funny side of the affair struck me and I burst into a roar of laughter. Poor old André's face was a study in apprehension and misery.

"Ah, Monsieur Jacques, you should never have seen that at all," he exclaimed. "Please—*please* do not recognise it when you see it again. I have been so careful never to let one client see what I am supplying to another."

"Oh, but I've known the central portion of this reliquary for years!" I told him. "Not long ago it was at Tigre's place, so plenty of other people must have seen it."

"*Que voulez-vous?*" said the old man, throwing up his hands with a gesture of despair. "But then my client is so *téméraire!*"

He was right: that energetic young man I had seen leaving in such a hurry certainly was over-bold. I believe André warned him of my visit and discovery, because afterwards there was no love lost between us.

Now we come to the end of that story which commenced on a dusty roadside near Auxerre. Years passed and one day, when looking through the catalogues of a very famous American collector, now dead, I saw the "Chablis" reliquary again. The compiler of the catalogue must have been an honest man; his doubts as to its authenticity were plain in the text in which he used such phrases as "It is believed that——" and "It has been stated that——" I happened to know that Tigre, the Paris antiquary, sold the relic for £800 and André must have charged

£1,000 for his share in creating this thing of beauty. The precious stones accounted for another £1,000: say a round figure of £3,000. *Who made the nice little profit between £3,000, and the £30,000, which the American collector paid?*

I have good reason to believe that not long ago the son of that collector called the dealer who emerged in a hurry from André's shop a thief to his face! It was he, of course, who pocketed the £27,000, and it is not surprising that he let this highly actionable remark pass with nothing more than a shrug of the shoulders. I would almost forgo my slender hope of Heaven to be in the other place when the famous American collector and that "clever" dealer meet again!

CHAPTER II

THE PRINCE WHO LOST HIS TAPESTRIES

THE disastrous effect of the world-war on most of the reigning dynasties of Europe let loose a flood of princely heirlooms on the art market, and in 1919 and 1920 every capital was swarming with agents and dealers who were connected with the open or secret disposal of priceless artistic treasures. Most of the stories of the known sales are interesting enough, but if one half of the secret negotiations were published they would read more like medieval intrigues than modern business ventures. I happened to be intimately connected with one of the latter: it involved me in worry, trouble and a considerable element of personal risk. For "reasons of State"—no idle cause—I dare tell this episode only by camouflaging a little identities, the locality, and by not giving too detailed a description of the articles whose sale caused international alarm and the taking of certain "State measures."

In June, 1919, I was motoring with my secretary in Europe in one of the countries which had been neutral in the war: let us call it Paldonia. I knew that there was an enormous amount of art treasures in the market, and also that at the Hague Cousin Joe (Lord Duveen) and one of my brothers were

reaping a veritable harvest of fine things which were being secretly exported from Central Europe. In this up-to-date "rushing" of frontiers, even Rembrandt took to the air! However, though I felt in holiday mood at being able once more to motor across Europe and was thinking more of mileage than of work, business and adventure caught up with my speedometer. One evening we arrived at a charming riverside hostelry and had just sat down to dinner on a balcony overlooking the water when the *hotelier* appeared, washing his hands apologetically.

"There is a lady, sir, who, hearing you were here, wishes most urgently to speak to you. I explained you were tired, but she is very persistent."

He used the word *dame* which, over a great part of the Continent, has rather a more distinguished meaning than our "lady." I could not be rude, so with a sigh followed the man to a private sitting-room where a woman in the deepest mourning was standing by the window looking at the river. She was plainly a person of high breeding and character, but her manner was hesitating.

"I am the Countess C——," she explained, "and I would not have dreamed of approaching you had I not been acting for a very exalted personage. I will tell you, in confidence, it is the Prince of ——"

"In what way can I help either you or him?" I asked.

"I have been charged to bring you to His Highness, who wishes to dispose of some priceless Gothic tapestries."

In describing the tapestries the Countess relapsed into German and, seeing I understood, continued in that language. It was obvious she knew what she was talking about, and the hunter's instinct in me stirred.

"If they are as you have described, I should be most interested to see and make an offer for them," I replied.

"Of course, Herr Duveen," she concluded, "provided this deal goes through, I shall expect the customary commission of ten per cent!"

It was said with such refreshing candour that I almost laughed. If the real story of the greatest art deals could be written without fear of libel, you would find the most startling eagerness for "customary commission" by people famous in Society and politics the world over. Not one commission either, but quadruple and quintuple ones to bring in thousands of pounds!

"Certainly," I said. "Ten per cent it shall be. But tell me: how did you know I was in Paldonia at all?"

The Countess smiled.

"The Prince has his sources of information. He rang me up personally an hour ago and told me, you would be spending the night in this hotel."

Half an hour later my secretary, the Countess and I slid away in a big limousine. We were to meet the Prince at once in a small country house standing in its own grounds some twenty miles away. He received me most charmingly in the presence of a

Court Chamberlain, explaining that in the interests of secrecy he preferred a meeting at a friend's house. While he talked I examined him in detail: tall, careworn, with a beard, hair *en brosse* and a notable air of kingship. His description of the tapestries did not betray the connoisseur, but when he showed me some half dozen photographs I steeled my face to show no amazement. Instantly I recognised the work of one of the most famous weavers of Philip the Good of Burgundy: at a conservative estimate those tapestries must be worth over £100,000. The Prince's voice trickled on as I bent to examine the illustrations.

"In so delicate an affair as this," he was saying, "you understand that I cannot appear. The matter must be conducted through intermediaries, but the price is \$150,000. If you will write out a cheque now I will hand you a receipt, and you can collect the tapestries at my castle in Burania."

Oh, these Princes and one-time Emperors! They all wanted good American dollars. They all wanted immediate payment. And most—like this Prince—could no longer enter their own countries. He dare not set foot in "my castle in Burania," and he really thought I was going to be fool enough to pay some £40,000, and then take the risk of being imprisoned as a thief by his compatriots! If this was the much-vaunted diplomacy of which we had heard so much, no wonder the war was lost by the Central Powers.

"I'm afraid that is quite impossible, sir," I replied. "Remember that I am a business man. You can

scarcely ask me to part with so considerable a sum without my having received the property."

"Do you doubt my word?" demanded the Prince, his beard bristling.

"Very far from it, sir," I replied. "But it may become a question of *force majeure*. In any case, I must examine the condition of the tapestries to assure myself of their good preservation. If they are as illustrated here, that will be just a formality."

I mixed my unpalatable refusal to pay cash so skilfully with the fact of his lost power that the Prince turned to the Countess for help. She sighed gently.

"Cannot *you* suggest anything, Herr Duveen?"

"Most certainly. If His Royal Highness will send for the tapestries, I will go anywhere in this neutral Paldonia to examine them. If they are as fine as I believe, I will pay cash and take delivery of them at once."

They looked at one another, then she returned to the attack. Her ten per cent was in grave danger.

"Here is a plan which may solve the difficulty," she said. "This Castle is situated off the beaten track in one of the wildest parts of Burania. There are few sightseers and, so far, the old servants who look after the place have not been molested by the new Government. This part of Burania ends in a strip of country lying between Paldonia and another State, but motorists—so long as they don't stay a night in Buranian territory—can cross that strip without many Customs formalities. Now, Herr Duveen, why should not you go as a sightseer, pack

the tapestries on to your car and be back in Paldonia before dark?"

I shook my head.

"You are asking me to become a smuggler? To take risks which become an adventurer more than a mere business man?"

"But don't you realise that the Prince's movements are watched day and night," the Countess persisted. "His friends and his servants are spied upon. If one of them entered Burania, his every footstep would be watched. You would be safe!"

After much argument it was arranged that I was to visit the castle as a tourist and the old game-keeper who had been left in charge would show me the tapestries. Having satisfied myself as to their authenticity and condition, I was to use the password, "*I like them very much.*" He would have his orders, and would that night smuggle them over the border into Paldonia while I returned as an innocent tourist. It looked rather a chancy business, but after all it was well worth the risk to obtain such a priceless treasure. I was not concerned with the ethics of the sale: the Prince would argue that the tapestries were his by inheritance, but the Buranian Government might retort that all Royal fortunes and heirlooms were sequestrated and hence the property of the State. Both were right or wrong, according to actual possession; it was just the old question of "nine points of the law."

During our conversation, the Court Chamberlain remained on one side stroking his ridiculously long

moustache and staring foxily at me, but now the Prince asked him to drive us back to the hotel.

No sooner were my secretary and I in the car than he turned to me and said in Italian: "Does your friend speak this language?" I knew what was coming, and said that he did not.

"Excellent," continued the Chamberlain. "You understand that I am the most trusted friend of the Prince? It is I, of course, who have initiated this sale, and through me you will gain a very handsome profit."

"Well?" I retorted rather sharply.

"What I require from you is just an acknowledgement that if a sale is effected I am to receive a fifteen per cent. commission."

This was a bit too steep! "I regret that I cannot pay any commissions unless His Highness knows of it!"

It was tantamount to a flat refusal, and the man stared sideways at me so malevolently that I knew I had made an enemy. But his words were smooth enough. I had no intention of paying away twenty-five per cent. in commissions over and above the \$150,000 of purchase price!

Two days were spent in preparations for the expedition into Buranian territory, and on the afternoon of the third day my secretary and I arrived at the castle, to find a little group of three men and their wives who were obviously tourists. That was all to the good: we should not be suspected. My instructions were just to ask the game-keeper whether he

spoke English, which would mean, "I am Mr. Duveen: what about the tapestries?" Then I was to linger behind so that he might have a chance later to speak to me. But this plan went by the board at once. There was no game-keeper; only a pretty girl of about twenty.

"Do you speak English?" I whispered.

She blushed violently and looked alarmed. After some minutes of puzzled annoyance, I hung behind the other tourists as arranged, but the girl seemed bent on hurrying us on. We passed from one room to another when suddenly she slipped back, put her finger on her lips and pointed to a door. I nodded, we let the rest go ahead and entered to find ourselves in a dimly lit room made ghostly by sheeted furniture.

"It will turn out all right, after all," I muttered to my secretary.

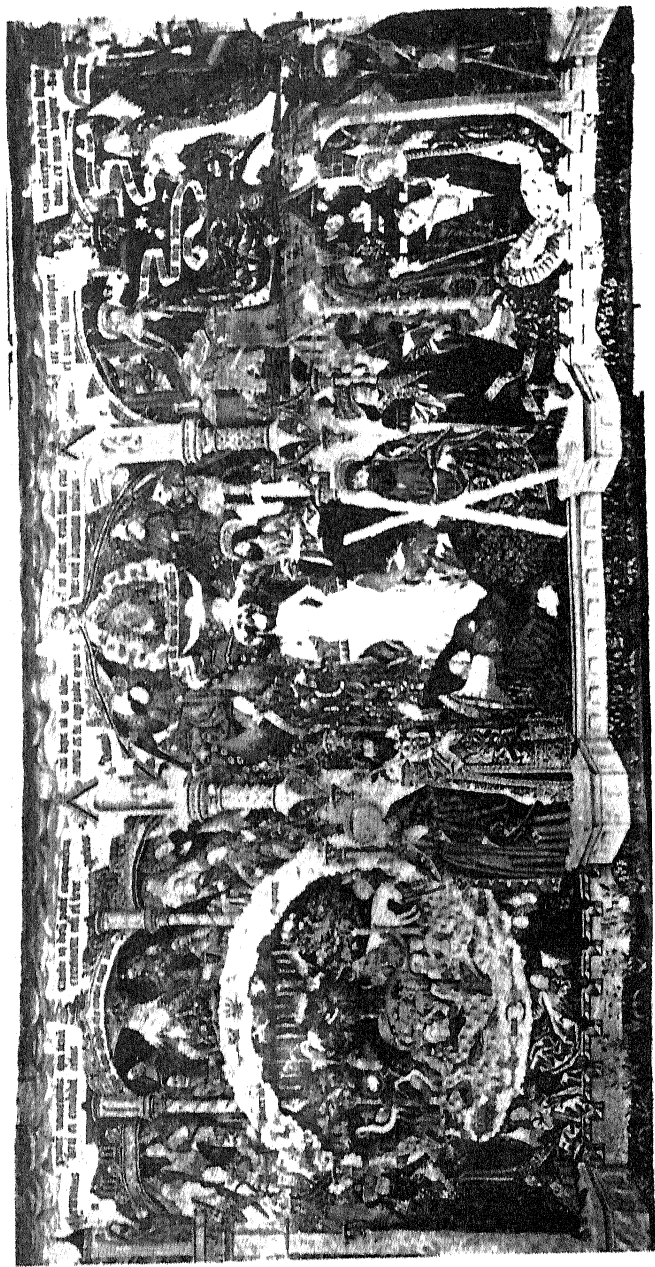
Footsteps sounded overhead, then returned down the staircase and presently we heard the tourists departing. At last the door opened, and there was the girl smiling and beckoning to us. She led the way to one of four towers which flanked the vast, grey pile, and a winding stairway brought us to a top chamber where a ruddy-faced old man with a white beard sat in a chair, his leg swathed in bandages and resting on a foot stool. He smiled and addressed me in German.

"I beg your pardon and your compassion, sir, but yesterday I slipped on the steps and broke my leg."

He explained the incident in such detail that at once I grew suspicious and alarmed. After a long

career in a business where intrigue is the rule rather than the exception, I have instinctively become suspicious of unusual circumstances. This accident seemed to me to bear the hall marks of the fake. The old man looked hearty enough, and I would have betted two to one in fivers that in an emergency he could have done the hundred in thirteen seconds, at any rate! But every moment I grew more anxious to have a look at these tapestries, and asked if I could see them without delay. The girl produced an enormous iron key and took us into a vast lumber room piled with boxes and odd bits of furniture. She pulled aside a torn paper screen and there was one of those large and heavy iron seventeenth century money-chests which it would have taken a gang of stevedores to shift. The lock, as usual, was concealed by a wrought iron ornament which could be slid aside after pushing a particular one of the many knobs with which the chest was ornamented. After a little trouble, the key turned and my secretary and I had all we could do even to lift the lid. Whilst we held it, the girl pulled out four pieces of heavy tapestry and I shall never forget the paroxysms of sneezing which assailed us. The "coffin" must have contained many pounds of finely chopped tobacco placed there as a preservative!

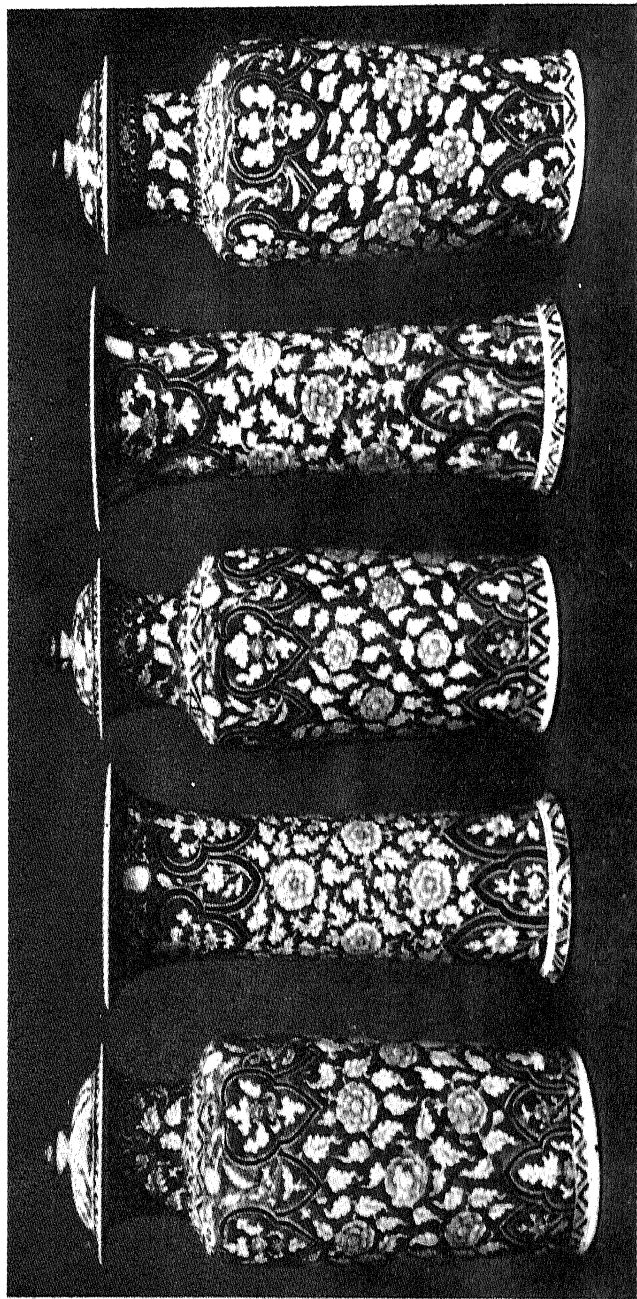
So soon as I wiped the tears from my eyes, I spread out the panels: the photographs had not done them justice. They were superb! About five feet in height by four feet wide, they represented scenes from the Passion. Unmistakably fifteenth century and richly



GOthic TAPESTRY: THE CREDO: TOURNAI

Fifteenth century (Vatican, Rome) given by Queen Maria Christina of Spain to Pope Leo XIII

[See Chapter II



[By permission of the Lady Lever Art Gallery]

THE HEESWIJK CASTLE SET OF AZURE CHINESE VASES WITH 'THREE COVERS

From the Jabach set, and exactly similar to the Jabach set (Kang-He reign, A.D. 1662-1722)

[See Chapter III]

interwoven with gold thread, they were the same type of tapestry as that famous Pierpont Morgan piece depicting the Adoration of the Eternal Father which has been valued at £100,000. To my joy, they were in an almost unbelievably good state of preservation and were worth quite four times the \$150,000 which the Prince was asking. With luck, and if I found the right purchaser in the United States, it meant a \$700,000 deal. The glowing beauties of those panels wiped anxiety clean from my mind. Suspicion vanished. For ten minutes I gloated over them before my secretary nudged my arm.

"This rain will make the mountain roads infernally skiddy," he remarked.

For the first time I noticed that water was cascading down the window panes, and at that moment there was a flash and a reverberating peal of thunder. He was right.

"Come on," I said, "we must get back before dark, otherwise we shall be held up by the Buranian Customs."

Together we carried the tapestries into the old game-keeper's room: the moment for my "Open Sesame" had come.

"*I like them very much,*" I told him, whereat his eyes lit up with a gleam of satisfaction.

Then came a check. He spread his hands with a doleful expression.

"But, Herr Duveen, what can I do? I cannot move: the doctor comes again to see me to-night."

I did not at all believe in this tale of a broken fibula; in fact I knew it to be a lie.

"I can trust no one on the estate save the little fraulein here," he went on, indicating his granddaughter. "She cannot carry the tapestries past the Customs. Meine Herren, cannot you possibly take them now, yourselves? There would be no danger!"

I shook my head decisively, but afterwards my secretary told me that he knew we were facing the *coup* of a lifetime. My deliberately calm and uninterested air, he said, gave me away to anyone who knew my idiosyncrasies. The little fraulein was meanwhile folding the panels and showing them to her grandfather, and that little bit of by-play did for me. I simply could not resist their beauty.

"All right. I'll take them with me now. Pack them up and bring them down to the car right away."

Wrapped carefully in a large green tablecloth, the tapestries were stowed safely, and presently my secretary and I were sliding and skidding down the abominable zigzags of the mountain pass. We had to do at least thirty miles on this tortuous, mud-smeared surface before we reached the nearest inn. We were cold and dis-spirited when we arrived in front of a ramshackle building, a rambling eighteenth century affair which had been important enough in the old coaching days, but for the last 100 years had been slowly dropping into decay. However, underlying the delay and discomfort was the heart-warming knowledge of those \$700,000 panels in the back of the car.

We were welcomed with true Buranian hospitality, and after a good country dinner and a bottle of wine

warmed to exactly the right temperature, I inspected my bedroom by the glimmer of candle-light. This was a vast apartment in the centre of which stood one of those enormous pottery stoves so popular in Central Europe. A much-faded blue paper hung in strips, but what attracted me was a great four-poster bed with faded red curtains. I was tired; how tired I only realised at that moment. It is true that usually I sleep badly under those feather-bed contraptions which abroad so often take the place of linen sheets and good blankets, but that night I fell asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow. I must, however, have had uneasy dreams, because I can remember struggling as though in a nightmare and suddenly waking to a pitch-black bedroom. I sat up in bed and threw the covers back.

“Who’s there?”

My voice seemed blanketed by the darkness.

“*Who’s there ?*”

There was nothing, save perhaps the faintest slither of feet. What was happening in this strange room in the mountains? Bogey-man terrors of my childhood reached out of memory and gripped me. I tried to speak again, to call out, but my throat was too dry. Sweat broke out on my face, prickling and cold. At last the tension grew unbearable. I reached towards the bed table to find the matches, and at that moment a beam of light blinded me. At one side of the beam I caught sight of the dark muzzle of an automatic pistol. My wits worked slowly, but I was just weighing up the chances of a quick snatch at the

pistol when the bed creaked and sunk beside me: another automatic was jammed into my ribs.

"*Maul halten!*"

That forceful German phrase, "Close your trap!" sent a shiver through me. Life was held very cheaply indeed in Central Europe immediately after the war: what was the pressure of one trigger, a bullet through one man after the extinction of millions? Burania and other countries were full of half-starving ex-soldiers to whom a ten-pound note was a small fortune.

"What do you want?" I muttered in German.

"*Maul halten!*" Then a voice snapped: "Lie down!"

At the same time the man with the electric torch banged me on the head with his pistol butt, and as I shrank back a wet cloth was thrust over my face and mouth. It was saturated with chloroform! Despite frantic struggles, the two men bore me down. I tried to cry out, gasped, inhaled the sickly drug, gasped again and saw a thousand lights before my eyes. I was slipping down into unconsciousness. I awoke to find my secretary shaking me by the shoulder.

"What's happened?"

I leaned over the edge of the bed and was vilely sick. After a while I recovered.

"The tapestries?"

"Gone!"

It was broad daylight: ten o'clock in the morning.

"Gone? How?" I murmured.

"We put the panels in that corner but they've disappeared. What has happened?"

Slowly I gathered my wits and, in the intervals of intense nausea, told my story.

"Look in my pockets," I told the secretary. "See if anything else is stolen."

My money, a valuable tie-pin and other odds and ends had not been touched.

"Shall I call in the police?" he asked anxiously.

I shook my head. The Buranian police were the last people I wanted to see. I had been idiot enough to embark on this foolish transaction in the hope of profit, and now I must stand the racket. Indeed, I was very lucky to have got out of the affair with a whole skin.

"Send the maid up with hot water," I groaned. "And tell the hotel keeper we shall be leaving in an hour. No, I *don't* want any breakfast!"

I stumbled into my clothes with an aching head and heavy limbs, and presently our bags were being carried down to the car by a porter.

"Tell me," I said to him, "were there any other guests in the hotel last night?"

He went a trifle pale and avoided my eye.

"No, sir. We have had no guests for three days."

It was useless to argue with the man. I let in the clutch and we slid away, making for the rendezvous in Paldonia which had been arranged with the Countess. The sooner we were out of Burania the better! Arrived at the meeting place, the Countess was not there. I was in a fury. Without a moment's

delay I made for the country house in which I had met the Prince. This affair had got to be sifted to the bottom! Here we had better luck, but before I could speak the Countess rushed forward.

"Ah, poor Herr Duveen," she exclaimed. "I have heard the whole story. Alas, we have lost everything. We were betrayed. The tapestries were taken from you by agents of the Buranian Government. The Prince has lost \$150,000!"

"Has he, indeed?" I replied grimly. "Well, *I* nearly lost my life!"

"Ah, we did not know that violence was used! One of our friends in the Government told us that you had been betrayed by a spy and the tapestries were gone."

As you can imagine, I was in a fairly bad temper after these experiences, and I was even more annoyed at the casual way in which the Countess spoke.

"What about the comedy of the game-keeper's broken leg?" I shot at her.

She had the grace to look flustered. She did not know whether I was bluffing or not.

"Yes, I am very sorry," she faltered. "After you had left for the castle we decided it would be safer for you to take the tapestries away, and I sent secret instructions to that effect."

"*Safer for me?*" I echoed. "Madame, your forethought leaves me speechless!"

I wanted to know a little more of the inner workings of this incredibly foolish business, because there would

have been no point in the Prince arranging an attack upon me.

"Who exactly knew about my visit to the castle?" I asked.

"No one except myself, the Prince, and the game-keeper. Oh, and Baron Y——. The Chamberlain, you know."

Instantly the plot solved itself. That infernal grafter who had been turned down over his demand for fifteen per cent. commission had betrayed me! I sincerely hoped that his commission from the other side took the form of a hearty "kick in the pants!" But within a few moments my unfailing optimism impelled me to another idea. I turned to the Countess.

"Well, that deal is dead. But has not the Prince some other valuable heirloom for sale? Perhaps we could strike a bargain after all."

She rose to the bait so eagerly that I knew instinctively she had been angling for this very suggestion.

"Of course I know, Herr Duveen, you have suffered a terrible disappointment, but I have been empowered to offer you another priceless work of art which you shall have at your own valuation. Please come with me."

She took me into another room and pointed to a Sevres vase. It was a factory imitation of the basest sort, worth perhaps £5 instead of the £2,000 it would have fetched if genuine. I looked at the Countess and smiled gently. She smiled too, but not with pleasure. Her bluff had been "seen" and she knew it.

"That beautiful vase," I said, too politely, "is far beyond my purse. I could not dream of depriving the Prince of so great a treasure!"

More than a year later I learned the real answer to the riddle of the happenings at the castle. Indirectly, I discovered that the robbery was no fake at all. Baron Y——, the Chamberlain, was hard pressed for money and had engineered the whole affair. Alas, for his plans. No sooner had his men who chloroformed me made away with the panels than they, in turn, were set upon by Buranian Government agents, who relieved them of their loot within half a mile of the hotel and while I was still lying unconscious! Dark dealings surround practically every great art treasure in the world, but it is not often that such foolishly brutal methods are used. On the other hand, the jealousy and hatred engendered has frequently carried ruin, and sometimes even death, in its train.

CHAPTER III

THE TRAGEDY OF THE JABACH VASES

THIS is a tale of how I fulfilled a boyish vow, regained my self-respect and eventually had to part with "hidden treasure" for about a quarter of its real value. Many years ago my grandfather, Jacob Hangjas, used to tell me about our great forbear and collector, Everard Jabach, pronounced *Shabah*. He was known throughout Europe as "the Cologne Maccenas" and Louis XIV had appointed him the first Director of the French East India Company. Being a financial genius and intimately connected with the East, he filled his houses with the finest porcelains produced in China, and it was on some of the broken and more or less worthless remains of these that my grandfather, Jacob Hangjas, expatiated.

"Do you see this king of all the blues?" he said one afternoon, picking up a badly damaged blue and white porcelain lid. "There used to be at least three complete sets of these lovely vases in Jabach's collection: one was in our branch of the family, through one of Jabach's daughters, one went to the famous collection of Heeswijk Castle, near Bois-le-Duc, and the third passed to the family in Cologne who died out during the "French Time" of 1795-1813."

My grandfather hoped that some part of the third set would eventually turn up at a sale in the Rhineland. These "Azure" vases, as he called them, became the obsession of my young life. I used to dream of them just as other boys dream of shooting or fishing or playing for their school. Once, indeed, when the old man took me on a visit from Haarlem to Heeswijk Castle to see the porcelains, I was very scornful.

"They aren't half such a 'king of the blues' as our old lid is!" I said proudly.

"Wait till your elders speak, *Kwajongen* (brat)!" he snapped, but I saw the twinkle in his eyes.

Years passed. I came to England, made my début in art circles by selling good china and Delft round half the towns of the North of England and generally served a pretty strenuous apprenticeship to that hardest of all professions. All the time I was learning, and you can imagine my delight when my step-father promoted me to sole charge of our new business in Liverpool. Things went well for a few weeks and then came a minor catastrophe. I had been too easy-going with the money entrusted to me: it was a case of helping a friend in Liverpool who had known my father very well. He was "up against it" and, without reference to higher authority, I lent him a considerable sum which was to be returned without fail within forty-eight hours. Remember, as you smile, that I was only twenty! The forty-eight hours became four weeks and I had to explain the position to my parents, who did not see eye to eye

with me at all. I got a good tongue-thrashing, but what hurt most was the way my mother looked at me and said just nothing at all. It was plainly up to me to make good the money in some way and also to rehabilitate my prestige. I went to my step-father, who was good nature itself.

"Look here, a client came in this morning and asked if we had a really big old oak fireplace for a house he is building in Cheshire. We haven't, but I know of one in a house near Malines, in Belgium, which should be just the thing. Give me a hundred pounds, I'll go and get it. Maybe it will make up for the loss."

He smiled and let me have the money without another word. That afternoon I left for the Continent, only to find late next day that the fireplace had just been sold to an American on holiday. Of course, I ought to have written first. Feeling rather foolish, I arrived in Brussels determined to look about and try and pick up something. In fact, I couldn't return empty handed. Next morning, in the bright sunshine, things looked rosier. I would go and see M. Cools, reputed to be the richest dealer in Brussels: a difficult old man but one who had taken a liking to me when I had been at school in the neighbourhood. He was extraordinarily bad-tempered and gruff, while his silver-haired wife was known for her charm and tact: they were really a very charming couple. Having no children they had adopted a very pretty niece and another young relative who had lately married and gone for a honeymoon to Cologne. I happened to

arrive just as the young husband was unpacking a truck: the yard was half filled with straw and sacking.

"What have you got there?" I asked, after the first greetings. "And where is old M. Cools?"

"He has just gone out for a bit," said his son-in-law. "Look what I've brought back from Germany. There is one. I've picked up a set of five of them."

He held up in the morning sunlight one of the greatest masterpieces of Nankin porcelain I have ever seen before or since. There were four other pieces like it: three vases of cylindrical shape and two shaped like beakers. I have already written of the great seventeenth century Chinese artist who, inspired by the sight of an ice-floe covered with prunus blossoms and in which the sky was reflected, produced the famous "Hawthorn" ginger jars. Here, in a flash, I not only recognised the work of that wonderful artist, but knew I stood in the presence of the "Azure" vases which had been lost since Jabach's day! They literally *were* azure. In the "Hawthorn" jars the artist gave us his impression of the effect of throbbing light on a dark blue ground. Here he had surpassed himself by creating the same effect of reflected sky on the most lovely shade of light, translucent blue. They conveyed the effect of a piece of crystal over which shallow wavelets lapped under the light of an Eastern sky in spring. If my description sounds too poetic or exaggerated, the vases are in existence to bear me out. The great Chinese potter had certainly succeeded in getting marvellous effects on one whole kiln-full of ginger jars, but in the case of these large

azure vases he had succeeded only in this instance. Maybe Jabach's other two sets had received too little or too much heat, according to their position in the kiln, but the superiority of this one became very obvious later when I had the opportunity of examining the Heeswijk set (now at The Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight) and various pieces in the two-hundred-year-old collection of August the Strong at Dresden. The upshot was that in this Brussels yard I was looking at the rarest and most lovely Nankin vases the world has ever seen.

The rest of the trunks were in the packing room, so we repaired there to examine the treasure in detail. Already my heart was in my mouth. "What is he going to ask?" was running through my head. As the last trunk was unpacked I noticed that one lid was only of wood painted to match the rest: a very poor copy. Apart from this they were perfect and might have come out of the kiln that very morning. Examining the vases for the tiniest cracks or flaws, I schooled my voice as well as I could.

"Ye-e-s. Very pretty. Quite nice. I'm going back to Liverpool to-morrow and think I have a client for large decorative vases. How much do you want for the lot; if it isn't too outrageous I'll buy them?"

The young husband straightened himself and put his hands on his hips, legs wide apart. His eyes met mine in a considering fashion, and I knew instinctively that he did not realise what he was selling.

"Well," he replied after a long pause which put

me on a rack of suspense. "Well—two thousand three hundred francs. They're worth it, you know."

I nearly gave a hoot of triumph. Seventy two pounds for that lot! I'd have given ten times as much and then thought it cheap. I glanced away so that he should not see my expression.

"All right. I'll pay that." I pulled out my wallet and handed over the notes. "You might as well give me a receipt right away, will you?"

While he was doing this I picked up one of the vases, fondling it as if it had been my own baby. I did not want to let it out of my hands for a moment! I called to one of the men to fetch a *fiacre*, and was giving instructions for re-wrapping the vases in brown paper when I heard a step behind me. It was old M. Cools. He came forward and clapped me on the shoulder.

"Well, youngster, I'm glad to see you again. How did you leave your——" He broke off, staring at the blue vase in my hands. His eyes never left it for a moment. Then!

"Ah! Something you've brought us to sell? Let me look at it."

The young man came forward with the receipt.

"No," I replied. "I've just bought the set from your nephew."

The old man's eyes glittered with a terrible wrath.

"From us? A *set*, did you say?" He whirled on the young man. "Where did you get it?" he roared.

The luckless youth pointed dumbly to the opened trunks, and the old man went over, picked up piece

after piece and examined them lovingly. Then he turned and snapped:

"How much did you sell 'em for?"

"Two thousand three hundred francs."

"*I won't deliver!*" screamed the old man, fairly dancing with rage. "I tell you I won't! It's robbery—a scandal—the boy was mad——"

"There is this receipt," I murmured, holding out the slip of paper.

Breathing heavily, he scrutinised it minutely. He could find no fault. There is an unwritten law in our business that a dealer stands by the price he has asked, even by mistake. I tried conciliation, telling him that after all it had been a perfectly fair sale. Our families had done business together for many years and he could scarcely cause an estrangement over a legitimate bargain. This diplomatic attitude seemed to calm him somewhat, but he still strode up and down the packing room muttering to himself. Of a sudden he shot a question at his son-in-law.

"What did you pay for them?"

"Six hundred marks." (£30.)

"Oh, *zot!*" (idiot.) "And you thought you'd made such a fine deal!"

Thinking it better to get clear of this family storm, I began to pack up the vases and asked the porter if my *fiacre* was waiting. The old man stopped his abuse like turning off a tap. He came over and spoke almost pleadingly.

"Please, Jack—let me have a look at them for a few more minutes."

I could not refuse, especially as he realised he was beaten. We laid all the pieces out on the floor and M. Cools sat down beside them on a low stool. He picked up one after another, turning them over in his hands slowly to enjoy the play of light on their surface.

"Ah, that incomparable blue!" he muttered. "*Wonderschoon, niet?* Wonderfully lovely, is it not?"

He looked up at me with so pathetic an expression that I found a lump in my throat. It was like a father with his little children.

"To think I have waited fifty years to buy you!" he soliloquised. Then, changing his mood abruptly: "And this nit-wit here goes and sells you for nothing before I even had a chance to see you!" He looked up at me. "Do you realise I have known of these in Cologne ever since I was a boy? The owners wouldn't sell, though they didn't realise they had the famous Jabach vases. They would have come to me if they'd been let alone. I knew these pieces when I saw them long ago in the Jabach house before it was sold." He was talking more to himself than to us: it seemed an outlet for his grief. I noticed that he used the same French pronunciation of Jabach's name as my grandfather. At last he stood up and straightened his shoulders.

"I'll have them packed up carefully and sent to Liverpool for you."

I shook my head.

"No, I want them for a special client who is on the point of going away; I have to take them with me."

Perhaps the old chap guessed what was in my mind: if I left them here they might not be delivered after all! He made a little gesture of resignation and made a sign to the porter to help me. Then, just as I was leaving, rage took possession of him again.

"Go," he yelled, as I moved to the door. "Go to hell and back again, if you like. You come here, damn you, buy these vases for nothing, and then insult me on top of it all by mistrusting me!"

It was only natural that he should feel sore, yet I had really done nothing of which to be ashamed. It was just a case of real knowledge being of value at the critical moment. At first I decided to send a telegram to my mother, telling of the *coup*, then thought better of it. I left for London, via Antwerp, for I was sorely tempted to show my great find to my Uncle Joel. Again I changed my mind, because lately there had been business differences between him and my step-father. As soon as I got back, my mother kissed me in a way which showed I was completely forgiven.

"I've brought you home a little present," I murmured. "Some pottery I thought you'd like."

When she saw them she gave a little scream of ecstasy.

"The Jabach vases! Oh, if only I *could* keep them! How in Heaven did you manage to get hold of them?"

Of course, they had to be told. We held a council of war on the spot, and though my step-father wanted to send them to Christie's, my own view prevailed that we should first offer them to a local client, Mrs. Hudson, the wife of the well known soap manufacturer. It was a thousand pities they had to be sold at all.

Imagine then, my mortification, when the good lady examined them and said rather scornfully: "Take them away! They are really too gaudy!" *Gaudy!* I felt so insulted that I nearly forgot my manners and said something I might have regretted all my life. There was one other client in Liverpool who would have liked to buy them, Colonel J. B. Gaskell, but he wanted a written agreement that he need not pay for them until his father, aged eighty, should die. It was a good thing we refused, because the old gentleman lived another fifteen years! In the end, there was nothing for it but Christie's. In the interval we kept those vases hidden in a big cupboard under the staircase, and every now and then my mother and I would sneak off to bring them out and gloat over their beauty. We had endless discussions as to which piece was the most lovely because, as is usual with old Nankin porcelain, one vase or lid differs from the next very slightly in shade and other details, just as would be the case with any hand-painted pictures.

The weeks went by and I think all our spirits sank lower as the sale at Christie's approached. It was a period of depression in the art business, so

we dare not risk placing too high a reserve on the set. If they did not reach the limit, we should have to pay a pretty heavy commission for nothing.

"They are worth £2,000," I told my mother. "Put the reserve at £1,000: they surely *must* fetch that even in these times."

After a lot of argument, the reserve was put at £600, because, as my stepfather pointed out, it minimised our chance of loss and yet did not prevent us getting £2,000 or more from a keen collector. The great day late in July arrived. I had been allowed to go up to London, and when I entered the famous salerooms almost the first person I saw was my uncle, Joel Duveen. Apparently the family tiff had been amicably settled, for he came over and spoke to us. My step-father nudged my arm as he did so, and I gathered that it was a hint not to mention the Nankin porcelain. It was a smallish sale, so we soon got to our lot. The auctioneer gave a brief description of the pieces and asked for the first bid.

"£100," came a voice.

It was Joël Duveen.

"Don't go and make a fool of yourself by bidding," muttered my stepfather. "Christie's absolutely forbid an owner doing that."

It was such a dispiriting sight that I could have cried. There were those lovely blue and white gems and bids were going up in miserable tens! From muttered comments of the other dealers I gathered that they placed the vases as just any ordinary

Nankin set worth at most £300. They called themselves *experts*! Joel Duveen was bidding slowly against the obvious reserve on the clerk's book, and once again I realised the truth of the famous "Duveen eye," that family flair for spotting something rare and beautiful. But such bids were a personal insult to me: had I not found the set myself, quite unaided? The voices droned drearily on.

"Five hundred and eighty guineas," was Joel's last word. There was no reply. The reserve had been reached. I could have broken down and blubbered with rage and grief. But there was more to come: insult added to injury. Joel Duveen came over to us with an ill-concealed air of triumph.

"Don't you realise that was the finest 'quality Nankin you'll ever see?" he exclaimed in Dutch. "I'd have gone to £2,000 for them in a straight fight with anyone in the room, but this pack of *schlemiels* (idiots) didn't think 'em worth £200!"

The word *schlemiel* has a specially derogatory meaning and no Jew will, if he can help it, ever do business with anyone who deserves this name. Perhaps Uncle Joel glimpsed in my face something of the agony of spirit I was undergoing. He stared at me and then nodded.

"So it was *you*! They were yours?"

"Yes, but don't call me a *schlemiel*! Father will tell you I valued them at £2,000 weeks ago. And look, Uncle. Do you know exactly what you've bought?"

"A damned fine bargain," he chuckled.

"No, much more than that. The famous, original and best Jabach set!"

Uncle Joel's eyes opened wide with amazement as I rushed on to tell him the family history and to implore him at all costs to keep the vases for himself. He shook his head.

"No, no, my boy. I can't do that. It breaks one of the strongest rules of the firm. Once I begin to compete against my own clients I'm a ruined man! I'm much too fond of beautiful things, as it is, and if once I let myself go I'd never be able to stop." He put his hand affectionately on my shoulder. "And you—you're a clever youngster, but a bit of a fool, too. Why send your finest things to a sale-room? Remember in future that it is just like gambling at Monte Carlo: you have to trust to luck to find a good purchaser, but a man who understands his business should never need to have recourse to a saleroom."

We turned to the stairs and were going down when he added in my ear: "Don't tell the others, or there'll be such a row."

"Why?" I asked. "Would they think you could have bought them cheaper direct from us?"

He gave me a wink and a smile and went down the street, leaving me a prey to bitter reflections.

Never have I forgotten Uncle Joel's advice about salerooms, because I paid a terrible price for the lesson. The memory of that transaction which began so wonderfully and ended in defeat has remained with me for years. Every time I thought of those

lovely azure Nankin vases an almost physical pain shot through me. As a matter of fact, I had not done with them yet. Many years later Fate was to bring me in contact with them again, an interesting sequel to the sale at Christie's which came many years later. In the meantime the azure vases disappeared, as I imagined, to America. One afternoon I was gossiping with that well-known connoisseur, old James Orrock, when I happened to mention I was in the market for some really good Nankin porcelain. He slapped his thigh and turned awkwardly in his invalid chair.

"The Jabach vases; the finest I ever bought!" he exclaimed. "God bless my soul, white on a light blue ground! Jack, you are the very man to get them back!"

"Did *you* buy them?" I shouted in excitement.

"Of course. And sold 'em to Arthur Saunderson, the Scotch whisky distiller, for £1,800! Saunderson is hard put to it and you'll probably get 'em for £2,000. Write to him in Edinburgh to-night."

"Give me a little note of introduction to him and I'll take to-night's train!" I exclaimed.

I was thrilled at the prospect of once again possessing those wonderful blue and white vases which I had met for the first time in the packing room of old M. Cools, in Brussels. On leaving Orrock, I took a hat from the hall peg and clapped it right down on my nose. Hullo? Not mine. Whose was it? Inside was one large initial in gold: "K." Someone waiting to see him, I supposed. Retrieving my

own hat I had lunch and returned to my uncle, Joel Duveen's place in Bond Street, where "Mr. Joe" had been enquiring for me. As soon as he saw me he said:

"You are off on a night journey?"

"Yes," said I, rather surprised. Surely old Orrock couldn't have told him in the meanwhile? "How did you know?" What I meant was: "*How much do you know?*"

"Never mind," said Joe. "But we want to be in on the deal."

"The devil you do! And why?"

"Trying to be clever, are you?" replied my cousin. "If you play that game you'll lose, all right!"

For half an hour we talked, and all the time Joe returned to this question of "our" share in my forthcoming deal. I let nothing at all out, but went back to Orrock and asked who his "K" visitor might have been.

"Kopp, of course," he replied. "Haven't you met him?"

I had indeed, five years earlier, at the time he sold Trajan's Column, in Rome, to Gardner, of New York. He had netted thousands over that "deal," and bore me a grudge because I had put a spoke into another of his little tricks, that time against my uncle.

"What did you tell Kopp?"

"Nothing at all," he said. "Just that you wanted to get hold of a certain collection of Delft pottery in Paris. By now he is probably wiring several dealers to try and put the price up on you!"

I laughed. Orrock knew Kopp and his ways. But that Kopp had told my cousin, J. J. Duveen, all about those azure vases I had not the slightest doubt, and hence the demand for "our" share on my deal! The Swiss was like a stoat after a rabbit when there was money in question. The only thing to do was to go straight up to Edinburgh and secure the azure vases while the opposition still thought about it. Unfortunately I neglected to reserve a berth in the sleeping car and, on arriving at Euston that evening, was searching for a seat when a tall, elderly gentleman wearing a long beard and a vast overcoat collided with me. In spite of this theatrical disguise, I recognised Kopp. Reserving a corner seat, I rushed back and asked for a ticket to Llandudno Junction on the Holyhead Line. That would put the brute off the scent! Then, going into the telegraph office, I sent a wire to my chauffeur in Liverpool to meet the train at Chester station. If this did not upset the calculations of the wily Swiss adventurer, I lost my bet!

I saw nothing of Kopp on the journey north, and at Chester took the precaution of getting off the train just as it began to move, so that no one could possibly follow me. The car was waiting and we began a rush across country by night. Half way to Liverpool there came a squealing of brakes as the car stopped dead: in the headlights I saw a man lying prone right in the middle of the road. Could it be Kopp again? I had that man on the brain. It wasn't the Swiss, but a perfectly paralytic drunk

whom we pushed, still snoring, into the hedge, and reported to the next policeman. Presently we reached Woodside Ferry, and were lucky enough to catch one of the steamers to Liverpool pierhead. Then came a race to Warrington and, at a ghastly morning hour, I picked up a slow train to Edinburgh. It was a never-ending and icy-cold journey which I still remember as one of the grimmest in my life! On the Edinburgh platform, after hot coffee and a wash, I telephoned to Mr. Arthur Saunderson who, kindly enough, asked me to come along right away. I felt a little thrill of excitement at having outwitted Cousin Joe and his infernal friend, Kopp. *As I emerged from the telephone booth who should I see but the Swiss, smirking complacently!*

"What—What——?" I gasped.

"I'm going to see Mr. Saunderson, an old friend of mine," he remarked with an odious smile. "Can I give you a lift?"

There and then we had a show-down. I was boiling with rage. Having, as I thought, completely outwitted him, here he was talking of "our" share again, just like Joe in London.

"Joe gave me a letter—here it is," he said, "which empowers me to buy for him in joint account with you. If you won't come in on it"—he shrugged his shoulders—"I shall bid against you. And I shall win!"

I was trapped. After a moment's thought I came to the conclusion that it was no good making a fuss, and I agreed to the whole deal being "in joint

account with Duveen Bros.” Twenty minutes later I stood in front of those beautiful azure vases which had been at once one of the great finds, and one of the bitterest disappointments, of my youth. They were even more marvellous than I had remembered. After some bargaining, I bought them for £2,200 from Mr. Saunderson, and paid a cheque for £200 on account. We sent a wire to Duveen Bros. confirming the transaction, and next afternoon I was in Bond Street where my cousin congratulated me on my good fortune. Then he could not resist his little joke.

“Well, Jack, old chap—who is the clever boy now?”

I stared glumly at him.

“Kopp trailed you all right! He asked the Euston booking clerk where you had booked to, and when you sent off a telegram knew you were trying to sidetrack him. From two words Orrock let drop he knew you were aiming for Edinburgh—so he went straight there!”

“All right. You win!”

“Now,” said Joe, pulling out a sheet of paper from a drawer, “let’s get down to business.” He wrote for a few moments. “Here is the expense sheet on joint account: you might just initial it.”

“What?” I cried. “£200 for Orrock by way of commission is all right. What’s this other £120?”

“Oh!” said Joe. “That is the expense account. Twenty for Kopp’s travelling and £100 for his cleverness!”

“And I pay half towards that cleverness?” I roared.

“You certainly do, Jack!”

Alas, I did. There was nothing else for it. However, four weeks later, I sold those lovely vases to Sir William Bennett for £4,200, whereat even Joe was moved to admiration.

“That beats me,” he admitted. “I’ve never been able to sell a Nankin set for such a price!”

Two years later Sir William sold his collection of “blue and white” to the late Dickinson, of Wigmore Street, and eventually the Jabach vases passed into the possession of Mr. Gaspard Farren, the South African millionaire, for just on £10,000!

CHAPTER IV

THE FATAL PLATE OF BERNARD PALISSY

DURING half a century of art deals and treasure hunting in Europe and America, it has often occurred to me that the most fascinating stories of old times could be "told" by the rare and beautiful objects I have held in my hands. For instance what an amazing history could be conjured up by most of the Crown Jewels or by some of the pictures and tapestries in the Royal palaces.

Now it so happens that once in my life I have touched the supernatural in this connection. I am sceptical of mediumistic trances and of the various kinds of phenomena produced by self-styled psychic "experts," and in the very few cases in which genuine phenomena *have* appeared I prefer to admit my ignorance of their cause rather than to invent theories to explain them. In this case I will relate a plain tale of facts for which I vouch. The reader can form his own conclusions.

In 1930 on a hot summer's morning in Florence I was approached by a curious little dealer-tout whom I had known for many years. He seemed to scent me out like a hound, for never did I go to Florence without his appearing within the hour at my hotel.

"What have you got to offer me this time?" I asked him.

He produced something wrapped in cloth, eyeing me like a cunning and wizened little monkey. The fellow could neither read nor write, but his shrewd eye for antiques had brought me many a fine bargain.

"There," he said, "there, signor. It is fine, no?"

He pushed under my nose an undoubtedly genuine Bernard Palissy dish. I recognised it instantly in spite of its covering of candle-soot and grime, because I had seen its counterpart years before in a farmhouse in the wilds of North Wales.

"I bought that from a small *contadino* (farmer) near Poggio-a-Cajano, the old Medici country palace near here," he told me. "It stood in his house for years in a niche behind the family Madonna: then he lost money, so I got it at last!"

"What do you want for it?"

"Two thousand lire."

"£20, eh? All right, here you are. But answer me this—it didn't cost you ten lire?"

From his guilty grin I knew I was right. Two shillings for the miracle of beauty which I knew underlay that coating of grime! When he had gone I went up to my hotel bedroom and with hot water, soap and a nailbrush began slowly to cleanse the dish. I knew that there would be a medallion portrait in the centre of some old-time "lovely," but I was not prepared to find a picture of the Princess Bianca Capello herself, famed as the most beautiful and gifted woman of the sixteenth century! Thanks

to having been thickly coated with smoke and grease, the plate was in a perfect state of preservation. The marvellous glaze of Palissy had protected it from all grease and the fact of it having been at the back of a little shrine had saved it from the untender mercies of the cleaner. This dish, I reflected, turning it this way and that under the light to admire its beauty, had come from Poggio-a-Cajano, the scene of a three-and-a-half centuries old love-story and tragedy. Perhaps in the long ago Francesco de Medici and the gifted Bianca—first his mistress and later his wife—had eaten from this very plate!

The possible connection between that drama and the beautiful thing I held in my hand intrigued me greatly. I had planned to leave Florence that night for the cooler North, but at the last moment I was summoned to the telephone. I heard the voice of an old friend, a professor who lived at a villa on the Pass of Abetone, one of the two main passes running north across the Apennines.

“Put off going until to-morrow,” he urged, hearing my plans. “After all, we haven’t seen anything of you for two years. Come and dine with us to-night: my wife won’t take a refusal.”

On the spur of the moment I accepted, and some time later was sitting with my host and hostess on their verandah which commanded a view of the loveliest vista in Tuscany. The professor, powerful, with a white-haired, leonine head, was in the middle seventies and had the exquisite manners which you

find only in Italians of the very best type. He had, too, an inexhaustible fund of anecdotes relating to the great and interesting personages of the last fifty years. His wife was one of the most imposing—if somewhat exalted—ladies I have ever met. By birth a Russian Princess, she possessed a fine intellect and was greatly interested in spiritualism. Now, I rather hold myself aloof from people who allow their lives to be governed in this manner, and I had heard that, accentuated by a very earnest religious sentiment, she had become somewhat fanatical on the subject.

As darkness fell myriads of fire-flies began to sparkle, so that, as we ate our dinner, they formed an ever-shifting canopy of stars against the thickly-wooded slopes of the valley. Conversation veered from one subject to another, and finally we began to talk of queer experiences. I explained how once I had received a kind of telepathic message, in that I dreamed my brother was dying in Africa at the very moment that he did indeed die. Then I could have kicked myself for having introduced such a subject. My hostess looked across with a curious smile and nodded her head.

“Yes, I knew it, Mr. Duveen. You were born with a caul.”

“I’ve never been aware of it,” said I, rather uncomfortably.

“That makes no difference. I was also born with a caul, and in my country we believe firmly that such children possess great psychic powers.”

The professor caught my eye and made a movement which said plainly: "Head her off from this subject," but having established what she thought was a spiritual link between us, his wife was not to be put off.

"I had a nurse from the Caspian Sea supposed to be descended from a very ancient Perso-Jewish family, and from my earliest years she guided my thoughts," she continued. "Quite often I have dreams which are just telepathic messages from those dear to me. I have proved it again and again. Sometimes there is a message from those who have passed over ten and even twenty years ago. There is usually some clue or very personal item not known to many people which establishes the reality of the message."

"Come, my dear, you must not impose too much on our guest," exclaimed the professor.

She took no notice of the interruption.

"Will you believe me when I tell you that when I hold something in my hands belonging to a person long dead I have received messages?"

Her glance was so penetrating that an answer had to be made.

"I will believe anything you vouch for."

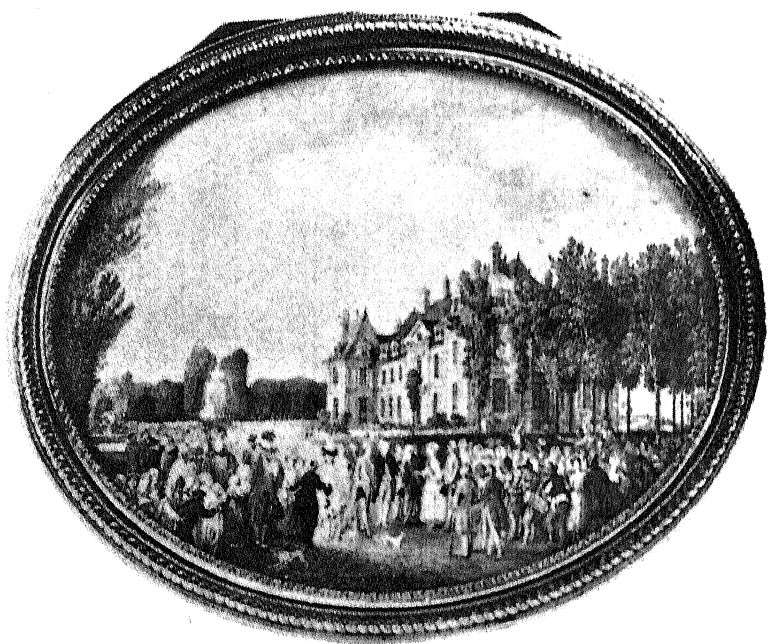
"I am glad. I think to-night I could do something which would be impossible with an unsympathetic audience. Perhaps it is because you are, in a way, spiritually allied to me and have been connected with such an experience in the past. Usually I establish communication with the other side by



A BERNARD PALISSY DISH

With portrait of Isabella Gonzaga, of the same set as that with portrait of
Bianca Cappello

[See Chapter IV]



A SNUFF BOX

With enamel painting by Blarenbergh (Wallace Collection) (*Enlarged*)

[See Chapter V

appealing to three of my beloved dead: give me something—some object in which you are very greatly interested, and perhaps through it I shall get a message.”

For a moment or two I felt at a loss. An awkward situation for which I was not prepared had been created, but I could scarcely refuse her request without discourtesy. The professor smiled at my embarrassment when I racked my brains for some object that would satisfy her.

“Need it be a personal thing?” I asked.

“No. Anything of your own in which you have a great interest. The more the interest the greater the possibility of success.”

Excusing myself, I went to the car and returned with the Palissy cake dish. Unwrapping it carefully, I laid it on the table.

“You do not mind Madame using this for her experiment?” I asked the old man. “I bought it only this morning, but my interest in it is very great.”

He nodded and smiled, but his wife leaned forward and said with an earnest air:

“Hold it closely in your hands, Mr. Duveen. Concentrate. Put everything out of your mind except the existence of this plate, and then think of one, two and three people whom you loved very much in this life before they passed over.”

I had commenced by feeling rather foolish, but Madame’s eyes sent a queer thrill down my spine. All of a sudden I realised that this was not just

mummery, but an experiment conducted with deadly seriousness which might have far-reaching results. The valley beneath us was very quiet, and a half-moon was just rising above the shoulder of a hill. It cast an eerie light across the verandah. I could just distinguish faintly the pattern of the Palissy dish. I sat clutching it in my lap, concentrating on thoughts of three of my dear loved ones. Then Madame stretched out her hand.

"Give it to me, please. Now sit beside me and think only of this plate."

The scrape of my chair sounded harshly in the silence. I sat down, scarcely daring to breathe. What would she make of this piece of pottery of which I had told her nothing at all? Indeed, it was far too dark for her to recognise the pattern, or even its rare make. Quite normally, then, my hostess began to speak. She was leaning back just as she might have done at afternoon tea. There was nothing mysterious in her manner, nothing of the "inspired oracle" or the dreamy monotone of the medium.

"I see this dish on a Renaissance *credenza* (dresser) in a vast room which is furnished in the same style," she began. "All kinds of fruit and confections are arranged in rich golden dishes, and on one dish—in the middle—is the portrait of a woman. Yes: a young man clad in purple velvet points at this dish and a servant in livery comes forward and takes it up. The young man hands a little box to the servant: it is jewelled. Now the scene is changing. I see a vast kitchen: the servant is talking to another

man—a cook. On the dish there is now a gaily-coloured cake. The servant is pointing to something in a pan. He scatters quickly some powder on the cake from the jewelled box: there are other figures—now another servant is putting the dish with the cake back on the *credenza* in the big room.”

I stared through the gloom at this extraordinary woman who was picturing for me a scene which, somehow, I knew quite well. *I was seeing what she herself saw!* She was reaching back into the mists of time and producing a detailed picture. Moreover, I knew just what she was going to say before she actually said it: I experienced that curious sensation which can be described only as being “fey.” Her tone was normally conversational as she continued.

“Three people have come into the big room, the young man in purple—a very lovely woman who moves with indescribable grace—and an older man. It is the woman whose picture is on the dish. She is talking and smiling, while flagons of wine are brought in. The cake is cut, the elder man takes a large slice and the lady also. The man in purple is eating fruit, and they stand in a group talking. A servant removes the plates and the wine: he takes away a small piece of cake which the woman has left. Now the servant is in what looks like a bedroom. He is still holding the dish with the fragment of cake and is looking round the room. There! he is hiding the cake at the back of a small shrine in which there is the figure of the Madonna and a small oil light. He puts the dish there too, and kneels down to pray.”

Madame's voice ceased and I had become so absorbed in the picture she called up that it was like waking to reality at night in a strange room. The professor sat motionless in his chair, the moonlight setting an aura of silver round his head. I scarcely dared to breathe, yet when my hostess began to speak again I felt a sense of loss. In some manner I had lost *rapport* with her: I could no longer divine what she was going to say.

"I see the servant praying before the shrine," she continued. "Now a man, a courtier, I think, is in the doorway. He comes forward, and, as the servant turns still on his knees, he plunges a dagger into his back! Two other servants appear and carry the body out, its arms and legs dangling. The courtier is looking for something. It may be the dish. He does not look behind the Madonna. Now we are in another bedroom, larger and very magnificent. The beautiful woman is sitting beside her husband who is in bed, retching and throwing himself about in great distress. The lady presses her hand to her breast as if in agony: she falls from the chair and is carried away by servants. Here is the young man in purple again. He disregards the man on the bed: he pulls back the hangings and is also searching for something he cannot find. The sufferer suddenly reaches out to a little table and sends a great crystal ewer of water crashing to the floor: men come running and with them many priests. They all kneel down: it is the Last Sacrament. Now the man in purple comes over to the bed and smiles evilly.

Slowly he, too, kneels down, but the dying man sits up and throws his arms out. His mouth opens. He is shouting something. His face contorts itself horribly—he falls forward——”

For what seemed a very long time Madame stopped speaking. At last she stirred uneasily: her breath came in gasps. Then—she uttered a cry of terror. I just saved the dish from slipping to the ground as she covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

“Oh, this accursed plate!” she cried. “I see it lying in fragments—the pieces are covered with blood.”

The professor and I supported her and, as lights were brought to the verandah, he reached for the decanter of cognac and forced some between her chattering teeth. She was moaning softly to herself, and seemed on the verge of collapse. Her husband took her to her room, but it was at least half an hour before she had recovered sufficiently to send her good wishes to me, through the professor, and to wish me *bon voyage* on my journey north next day. The professor was good enough not to blame me for this distressing incident, and I took my leave with such excuses as I could muster.

Next day I kept turning over in my mind the facets of this amazing affair. The lovely woman was, of course, Bianca Capello, whose portrait was on this very dish. She married a wastrel and then became mistress to Francesco de Medici, young heir to the reigning Grand Duke of Tuscany. When her

husband was murdered and Francesco's wife died, he married Bianca, who encouraged art and letters, and managed to win over most of her husband's bitterest enemies by her charm. The man in purple was, of course, the devilish Cardinal Ferdinand de Medici, Cardinal of San Giorgio, who foully poisoned both husband and wife, and then had his accomplice put away with a dagger thrust. But my hostess did *not* know the dish to be Palissy ware: she never knew it came from that fateful Medici country house at Poggio-a-Cajano: she could have known nothing at all of its history. Yet she described with historical accuracy and the vividness of an eye-witness a scene connected with the dish which had happened more than three hundred and fifty years earlier!

During the next two years I travelled all over Europe, and during that time both the professor and his lady died. Once again, having come to Italy, I laid a handful of flowers on the graves of my old friends at San Miniato. Then, on 2nd June, 1932, I was motoring from Berlin to Essen with three friends to visit an art-loving friend. In the car were various interesting odds and ends which I had picked up from my Berlin flat, and we were running at certainly something over 70 m.p.h. along that magnificent stretch of road between Paderborn and Soest when sudden death stretched out his hand over us. Just after we had passed West Onnen, a half-drunken lorry driver swerved his machine out on to the road from a hedge-hidden track! He was going at a fair rate and never saw me at all, but his mate did. He

gave the man's arm a nudge, and that precipitated the crisis. If he had "trod on the gas" maybe we should have got clear, but he hesitated for a fatal second. It was enough. The road was completely blocked and there was no chance of skidding into the field track from which the lorry had come. With screaming brakes, rocking from side to side, my big 90 h.p. car tore towards a tiny gap between a tree and a dry ditch bordered by a wall.

With an appalling crash the tree ripped off one mudguard. Maybe that acted as a brake, because somehow in miraculous fashion the car slid into the ditch, scraping the wall with an agonised sound of tearing metal and the crash of splintering glass. There we were, half upside down, with windscreen and every window in fragments. The steering wheel had gone to bits in my hands and from the back of the car came low moans. Then a tongue of flame shot out from underneath the bonnet!

"Get out, for God's sake!" I yelled. "Get the door open!"

One man at the back was badly gashed on the face by flying glass, one was unconscious and the third struggled with the jammed door. Blood seemed spattered everywhere. Somehow we tumbled out into the ditch. I did not care much about the car; my only thoughts were for my companions and the treasures I had packed into the back.

The unconscious man was laid in the road, while I clambered in again, pulling and wrenching at various parcels and boxes. As we got them out,

something caught my eye. One smallish package lay on the floor, half open. It contained a mass of fragments of pottery. *It was my broken Palissy dish, covered in blood!* In a split second my mind was back again on that verandah in the Tuscany dusk: the professor's wife—her tale of Bianca Capello—her vision of the future! *It had all come true to the very letter.*

The consequences to my friends were not as serious as I had at first imagined: one, whose nose was broken at football had had it re-broken and this time it was set straight, and the rest was an affair of cuts and bruises. It cost £250 to repair the car, but I would have paid twice that amount to have kept my Palissy dish. As I said before, I can give no rational explanation of what seems a case of both pre-vision and the calling up of a centuries old drama. That masterpiece of Bernard Palissy seems to have been connected from first to last with intrigue, fatality and sudden death.

CHAPTER V

THE TITLED KLEPTOMANIAC

WITHOUT wishing to disparage Liverpool in any way, I may at least say that it neither is, nor has been, a great centre for the art collector. In the past there were no dealers who stocked really fine things, and so the wealthy merchant princes of the Mersey City went to London for their bargains. Thus when I was put in charge of our newly-opened business there, I had constantly to face the indignant surprise of people who came to enquire the price of some beautiful object in our showroom windows.

“What! Five hundred pounds for that!” Then they would go off without even saying “No, thank you!”

However, we did our best to attract the really great collectors of the North of England and to educate the taste of others. I never grew tired of talking to anyone who showed the slightest interest in art, and it was during those early days of “teaching the blind to see” that I cultivated the faculty for quick and instinctive analysis which has helped me so often to “place” a certain object as genuine.

During this policy of bringing the finest things to Liverpool, my father arrived one day, and from his

manner I knew he had something very unusual to show me.

"Look at this," he exclaimed. "I got it from a Spanish dealer for less than half its real value. It really is a gem of workmanship."

He put into my hands a lovely little Louis XV gold snuff box, richly ornamented with enamel paintings of the very highest quality. It was one of the finest I have ever seen, by that great miniaturist, Blarenberg.

"I picked it up for £600 and it's worth double. Put it somewhere to show to advantage."

There was a show-case on the ground floor which held a collection of gold and enamel watches and snuff boxes, so I re-arranged these, putting the new purchase in the fore-front so that any clients who came in could not fail to see it.

The case was fairly often opened for people who liked to examine these beautiful things, whether they bought or not. I kept the key of the case and one day, about a week later, a Mr. Charles Carler came in to have a look round. He had been a good client even before we opened a branch in Liverpool, but heavy gambling in cotton had played havoc with his fortune, and he had been forced to sell various treasures from his collection. In fact, rumour had it at this time that he was perilously near the financial rocks, though that made no difference to my friendship for him.

"Come along and look at one of our new treasures," I exclaimed, walking towards the show-case. "I

know you are a judge of a fine thing and this ought to please you."

I handed him the snuff box. He was delighted with it, turning it over admiringly, but shook his head and sighed.

"I'd give a lot to be able to buy it."

We stood talking for about ten minutes while various clients were coming and going, and then he left. I was busy and thought no more of the matter, but just before the premises closed for the night my step-father came up with a worried air.

"Where is the Louis XV snuff box?"

I stared at him.

"In the show-case, of course."

"It is not."

With a sinking heart I ran downstairs and went to the case. The glass doors were locked. There were all the rest of the watches and snuff boxes, but only a vacant space on the shelf where the snuff box had been. I turned to my step-father and answered his unspoken question.

"Yes. I showed it to-day to Charles Carler. That was just after lunch. I put the box back on the shelf and locked it before he left."

"Sure you did lock it?"

"Well, nearly sure," I replied, feeling terribly worried. "I may have gone up to the first floor for a moment or two—in fact I think I did, to advise one of the salesmen. But I do know that I locked the case up again almost at once."

My step-father shrugged his shoulders.

"Better go and ask the assistants before they leave. Is there any other key?"

Everyone on the premises was closely questioned, but no light could be thrown on the mysterious loss. No key other than mine existed, and we tried to check up on who had been in the ground floor showroom during the late afternoon. After all, having paid £600 for an article for which you hope to get some £1,200, it is not pleasant to have to suspect either your staff or your clients of theft. After a little my step-father voiced the suspicion in all our minds.

"It could only have been Carler. You say you were with him *nearly* all the time. Yet in one instant he might have slipped it into his pocket. I think it is a matter for police investigation."

Suspicion certainly pointed to Carler, but I refused to believe him capable of such an act.

"Hang it all, we've known the man for years. He has bought lots of expensive things from us before we opened here: you can't go and accuse him on such flimsy evidence."

My step-father shook his head obstinately.

"And we can't afford to lose £1,200 snuff boxes."

He set out the case so clearly that I was almost convinced by his cold logic, but on the other hand we could not afford the inevitable scandal which would follow a complaint and official investigation. In this dilemma, I thought of my mother who, having heard the facts, took her usual decisive line of action.

"I know the Carler family," she said. "They are not the kind to steal. I simply refuse to have any kind of scandal and I won't allow a complaint to be made."

My step-father made a grimace and shrugged his shoulders.

When she spoke in that tone of voice, he knew it was useless to argue. If it came to matters of importance, she was the real head of the firm, because, when my father died, she had carried on the business for six whole years and had taught both me and her second husband nearly all we knew. She did, however, concede the point that if the snuff box did not turn up within three days we might go and consult an old legal friend, the late Mr. Rotch.

During those three days I worried myself sick over the loss. To a large extent the fault must have been mine, and for the life of me I could not remember definitely whether I had locked the show-case before leaving Carler or afterwards. Moreover, how could we mention his name to Mr. Rotch, who moved in the same social circle? It would be tantamount to a direct accusation. When my step-father and I saw Mr. Rotch it was at his house and, after a glass of sherry, we explained the circumstances of the visit. Rotch smiled and put us at our ease.

"I am not a lawyer now, I'm just a friend," he said. "Tell me the details: they won't go any further."

He agreed that everything seemed to point to Carler.

"I happen to know that he is very hard up indeed at the moment," he said, "and £600, let alone £1,000 or so, would be just what he needs. On the other hand, young Jack, you can't be *sure* that no one has taken an impression of your key and used it."

"No," I exclaimed. "I feel certain you are wrong. In the first place, Carler would never do such a thing. In addition, if he had stolen the box what could he do with it? He could never sell a noticeable thing like that anywhere in this country without being found out. At the most he could break it up and thereby lose nine-tenths of its value. As for the key, it is never out of my possession for a moment."

Mr. Rotch promised to make discreet enquiries, and in the meanwhile there was nothing to do but wait. The snuff box was not insured, and, even had it been, the enquiry resulting from a claim would have been most unpleasant. Two days later Rotch asked us to call again. Apparently Carler was deeply in the hands of money-lenders and was at his wits' end for ready cash. He had applied to most of his relatives for help with very little success and it seemed there was even some talk of his leaving the country.

My step-father threw up his hands.

"We are fools, Mr. Rotch. We ought to have called in the police right away. I shall lay a complaint this afternoon."

The lawyer agreed rather regretfully that it did seem the only course, but at lunch the same day my mother took a hand in the game again.

"You are *not* going to Dale Street police station," she told her husband. "I won't have anything of the sort. I'm not going to have my business publicised and ruined like that."

I muttered something about having been against that all the time, but my step-father exclaimed:

"What about the loss, then?"

"The loss, the loss!" cried my mother. "Don't you understand we shall never see that box again? Not even if we send the thief to prison?" She turned to me: "We shall have to cut the loss, and you, Jack, can remember that you allowed it to be stolen right under your very nose!" She looked at me very straightly for a moment, and added: "And now we know who is to blame, I don't want to hear any more about it. We've lost money before and made it up again, and we'll take this loss without making ourselves miserable about it!"

The clever darling! In a few words and with masterly insight she saved the situation. She had prevented any possibility of scandal and apportioned the blame so as to spare my step-father's pride and overcome his obstinacy. Finally, that look in her eyes told me that what she really meant was—"without making *me* miserable about it!"

Nevertheless I felt the whole thing very keenly indeed. I turned it over in my mind, and next day went to my mother.

"Don't be annoyed, but I know I'm right. Carler couldn't steal. Will you meet him: let me introduce him to you?"

"Certainly," she said, smiling. "Make your own arrangements."

Next day I telephoned to Carler that I wanted him particularly to see some new *objets d'art* recently arrived from Holland, and extracted a promise that he would come round that afternoon. I told my mother and waited in impatience for the interview because I felt I should be able to tell from his manner if he were guilty. At three o'clock he arrived.

"Afternoon, Jack," he said, shaking my hand limply. "I don't feel like looking at pretty things." Then, beneath his breath, "Too damned hard-up!"

My mother passed and I introduced Carler. After a few polite words she left us and then I showed him a very beautiful Vernis-Martin fan which I had purposely placed in the very show-case from which the snuff box had been taken. He admired it listlessly and himself put it back in the case. He stared for a moment.

"Hullo! You've sold that French snuff box then?"

"No—that is—er it is out on approval," I stammered, completely taken aback.

"Business good, I suppose?" he added.

I muttered something in reply. Either this fellow was completely innocent or a thorough and very clever scoundrel! There was an awkward pause and then Carler said:

"By the way, Jack, be a good fellow and do me a favour. Could you lend me fifty quid? You shall have it back to-morrow morning."

This was so unexpected that I just goggled at him.

"I believe they have just taken the cash to the bank," I stammered. "But wait a minute—I'll see what I can do."

Towards the back of the premises my mother was waiting, pretending to be busy on a catalogue. I told her of Carler's extraordinary request, but she just smiled.

"He didn't steal the box. Give him the money."

It was an example of her amazing insight into character. Carler wrung my hand and left hastily, and sure enough came back next morning.

"Here you are," he said, handing me five ten-pound notes. "You did me a bit of good, Jack, and I'll not forget it. I'm damn grateful to you."

For ten days things went on as usual. I couldn't get the affair out of my mind, though I did not refer to it for fear of worrying my mother. It seemed as though we should never get to the bottom of that theft when, one morning, I saw a familiar figure come into the show rooms. It was Mr. Lerritt, private secretary to Lord Y, a great Lancashire landlord. I went forward to greet him, and we were talking about various matters when suddenly he turned to me and said rather apologetically,

"By the way, about that Louis XV gold snuff box which Lady Martha took away on approval: her Ladyship has decided to keep it. Would you mind sending in the account?"

At that moment I heard a crash behind me. There was my mother, the fragments of a porcelain plate

at her feet, swaying and holding on to a table. I ran to her and caught her in my arms.

"Oh, I feel so ill," she exclaimed. "Take me upstairs, Jack."

When we were alone she smiled wickedly. There was nothing the matter with her at all!

"Never mind, Jack, that plate was cracked already. I heard what Lerritt said. Go downstairs and tell him that we have a good buyer for the snuff box and that if Lady Martha doesn't want it very particularly, we'd be only too glad to have it back." Then, just as I was going: "No, wait a moment. Tell him that you made a mistake in the price and that we cannot let her have it without a very considerable loss!"

Ah, she was a wonderful woman! I played my part in the comedy gravely enough, and I feel sure that Lerritt was grateful. At any rate, he played up to me splendidly.

"I will explain the facts to her Ladyship," he said, "and I think she would be glad to oblige you. In fact I think I can promise it."

Subsequently we discovered that Lady Martha was a kleptomaniac who was well known to the big stores of the district. Her large muff had at times been found stuffed with all kinds of curious things, from silk stockings to briar pipes and nailbrushes! Of late years she had never been allowed to go shopping without a lady-companion who, remaining in the background, used to watch and eventually pay the shop-keepers for the stolen articles. It used to be explained—in fact it became quite a cliché—

that "Lady Martha took these on approval and has decided to keep them!" In important cases this duty fell to Mr. Lerritt. She must have come into the showroom that fateful morning just as Charles Carler went over to look at some other piece and I was momentarily engaged, so that she slipped our Louis XV gem into her handbag and moved away unnoticed.

"Of course," said my step-father rather grumpily, when he heard about it, "she ought to have been made to pay."

"Not at all," replied my mother. "It would have been very bad policy indeed even to have suggested it."

As usual, she was right. The business we did afterwards with Lord Y and his guests more than compensated for all the anxiety and trouble we went through. One thing I never did discover, and that is how Lady Martha managed to give her lady-companion the slip and make away with the snuff box right under our noses. From the fact that Lerritt came in so long after the theft, I gathered that she must have secreted the box at home and, when it was discovered, admitted what she had done.

CHAPTER VI

THE MADDEST COLLECTOR I HAVE EVER KNOWN

I SUPPOSE it is true that, from one standpoint, there are collectors who may be said to be suffering from a species of dementia. It makes no difference whether they collect Nankin porcelain, Old Masters, postage stamps or matchbox lids. In some cases, too, they lose all sense of proportion, and from the angle of morality obtain their hearts' desire by crook, if not by hook. They seek beauty and rarity, and therefore the history of most of the great art treasures of the world is packed with instances of their rapacity and greed. There is the case of poor Ludwig of Bavaria who, in spite of ruinous expenditure and his untimely death, left collections to his country worth ten times the money he had paid for them. Whether he was mad or not has never yet been decided.

One of the craziest collectors I have ever met was the internationally famous *Frau Ermina Feist, née Wohlheim*, of Berlin. There was a terrible woman! A kind of female counterpart of Pierpont Morgan, the elder. Not only was she one of the greatest heiresses of her time, but her collection of Dresden china was superb. Kaiser Wilhelm himself cast the eye of envy upon it, and what Wilhelm wanted he generally

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got. Here is a little fragment of unwritten history concerning their relationship.

In his usual energetic attempts to increase the wealth of the Berlin museums, the Kaiser was in the habit of visiting provincial galleries, churches and even private collections. A word of admiration and a tactful hint to the officials was usually enough to ensure a picture or the *clou* of some gallery being transferred to Berlin. In the case of private collections an important personage in the Kaiser's entourage used to call upon the owner, tell of the All-Highest's special admiration for some object and then—pointedly—explain that the Kaiser would do him the honour of having tea with him. In return, of course, the object was to be donated to some Berlin art museum.

One day Frau Ermina Feist received just such a visit, and the Imperial ambassador mentioned the names of several collectors who had been thus “honoured.” Ermina, with her beloved Dresden in danger, fought like a tigress.

“Do you not feel it an act of graciousness on the part of the All-Highest?” demanded the visitor, in slightly scandalised tones.

“Not at all,” replied Ermina. “His Majesty has taken tea with so many collectors that I don't consider the honour worth *my* collection!”

Frau Feist—as I shall show later—was frankness personified: witness her famous *mot* to a very well-known collector in Berlin who was always “adopting” and assisting promising young men. It was during

a *soirée* at her palatial house on the Wannsee when the connoisseur was standing lost in admiration before a picture of a boy painted by, I think, Rembrandt. He seemed rooted to the spot, whereat Frau Ermina broke rudely in on his reflections.

"Ah, *mein lieber freund!*" she exclaimed in a loud tone of voice. "There is something you can't buy with money!"

Post-war society in Berlin was more than a trifle coarse-minded: there was a gale of laughter from pretty women and uniformed men during which the abashed connoisseur made an ignominious exit!

Ermina was the only daughter of an immensely wealthy German coal-owner, and in order to obtain some special piece I have known her descend to subterfuges lower than those employed by any dealer. That is saying "a mouthful!" She was, naturally, a veritable Godsend to dealers in Europe and America, and though I had heard much about her curious ways, until this time I had never actually met the lady. Imagine my surprise when one day I received a letter from her.

"Some years ago I bought two very beautiful Dresden porcelain tables from Messrs. X, of Bond Street," she wrote, "and I think they were cheap at £1,200. When you are in Berlin I should be happy to see you, especially if you can offer me any very fine pieces of Dresden."

That opened my eyes. I had sold those tables to the London dealers for £500! On the other hand Frau Feist was far too fond of lawsuits. Also, a

little ring of German dealers regarded her as their own special property, and if anyone tried to "muscle in" on their ground there was apt to be trouble. I let the matter slide for a month or two, and then came a note from a German expert asking whether I could persuade the late Lord Ripon to sell part of his wonderful collection of porcelain to Frau Feist. He and a friend, he explained, had examined the Ripon collection and found it very fine indeed and quite genuine. The trouble was that Lord Ripon refused to sell the best pieces: the collection must be bought as a whole. Ermina, on the other hand, wanted only seven of the objects. Could I do anything about it?

No, thought I; I cannot. If I do I shall be dragged into this woman's clutches; there will be endless trouble with her and my German competitors. Again the Berlin expert wrote saying that the Ripon collection was known to be unique, so there could be no possible danger of litigation with Frau Feist. He was so persuasive that I agreed to co-operate with him: but later we were both to learn a lesson in real feminine chicanery!

After some months of negotiation I arrived at the point where the late Lord Ripon consented to sell the first 40 lots of china in his catalogue, which included the seven very fine pieces which the lady wanted to acquire. The price to me was to be £25,000. Further, Lord Ripon agreed to my taking these seven special pieces to Meran, in the Austrian Tyrol, where Frau Feist was staying, but he stressed the fact that if she did buy she would also have to

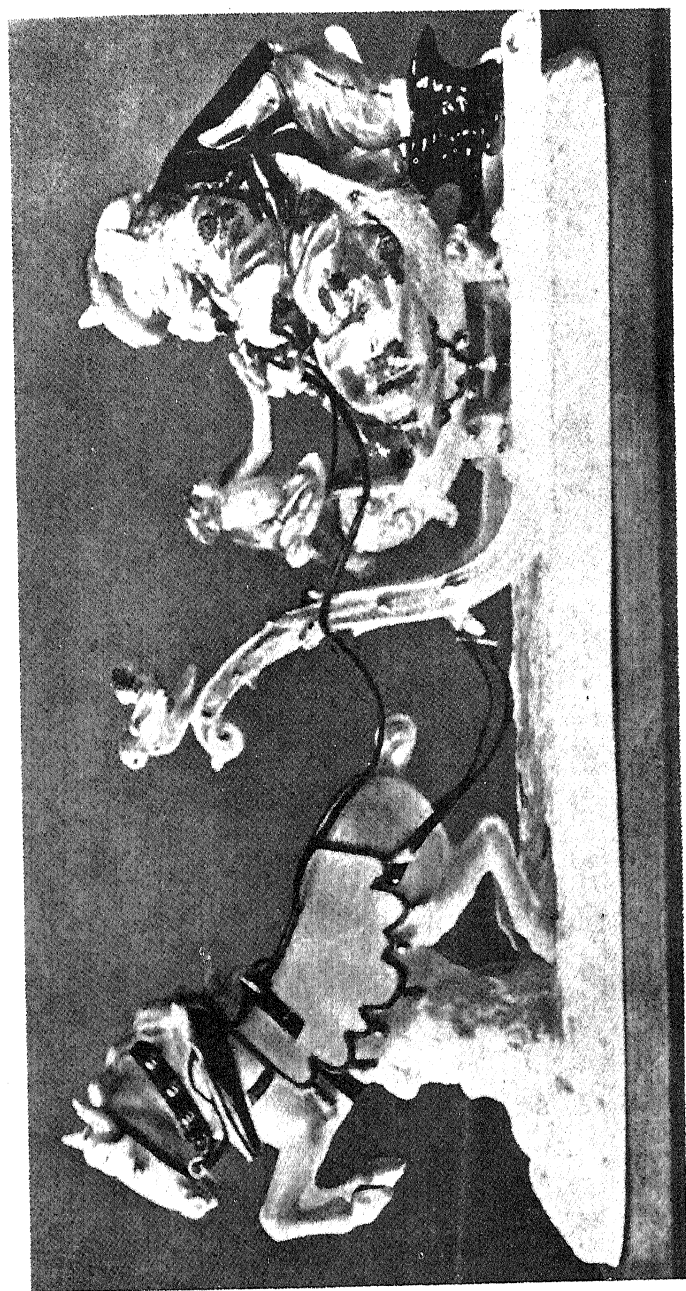
take the rest of the forty. At this moment a great friend of mine came over from the Hague and, hearing of the proposed deal, grew most excited.

"You don't know what a mad-woman she is!" he exclaimed. "If she can't 'do' you, she will withdraw at the last moment and leave you stranded with the collection. And if you succeed, X and Y and Z (noted German dealers) will cause trouble and you'll have a lawsuit with her. They are absolutely unscrupulous. For goodness' sake, keep clear of the whole thing!"

His earnestness so convinced me, and the tales he told were so unpleasant, that I threw the whole thing up, writing to the Berlin agent to explain the reasons. *He sent my most uncomplimentary letter on to Frau Feist!* She, instead of being offended, sent me a charming reply through the dealer.

"My law-suits in the past were forced on me by fraudulent dealers," she explained, "but with you there would be no possibility of that. I know that Lord Ripon's collection is genuine and very fine. This being so, I will buy the pieces without any guarantee at all and I will pay cash on delivery."

That looked fair enough: I could scarcely go wrong in the face of such a letter! Accordingly, I reviewed the position. Lord Ripon stipulated that all forty pieces must be sold, but it would be useless to try and make Frau Feist buy them. I would get a good price on the seven, and take over the rest myself to sell at a later date. I telegraphed the lady at Meran that she could have her pieces for £11,000 and I would



DRESDEN PORCELAIN SLEIGH GROUP

The only one in existence. Bought by Frau Feist, of Berlin, for £3,500 and since sold for more to a French collector

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FRAU HERMINA FEIST

The great German collector; she is wearing a priceless Venetian Lace Collar

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bring them over at her risk and expense for a cash sale. She agreed; then came the business of packing up that lovely china. They were nearly all crinoline groups, the most valuable type of Dresden, but the *clou* of the whole collection was the famous sleigh group, the only one known, which figured in my cost-list at £2,500. I determined to sell this to the client at £3,500: it was worth it.

Each of the seven pieces was put into a small case and the whole were then packed again into four large hampers. In spite of that, my assistant and I personally supervised their removal at every boat and train change. At Frankfort, before we could reach the van, the German porters just bundled them out on to the platform as though they had been concrete, and I passed the rest of the night in terror till, at Munich, I assured myself that nothing had been broken. The wooden bases, the strings with which they were tied, and the immense pads of cotton wool had kept them from injury.

Arriving at the hotel in Meran at lunchtime next day, we discovered that "Madame has not yet risen." Apparently she never got up before three in the afternoon, and then went to bed again at four the next morning! At three o'clock to the minute an hotel servant came to me.

"Madame will receive the gentlemen at *petit-lever*. Will they be so kind as to bring the boxes upstairs?"

There she was at last, sitting up in bed in a none too clean, lace-edged kimono. A grey silk shawl covered her hair, which straggled over her forehead, and

without the firm restraint of corsets her figure bulged alarmingly. Not at all the sort of person I should have imagined as the owner of the finest Dresden china in the whole of Germany!

"Ah, my dear Herr Duveen!" she exclaimed, clasping my hand with both of her be-ringed ones. "I have heard so much about you: you have been put to so much trouble over this business. What energy you have!"

Within a few moments I had unpacked the first of my seven masterpieces and she was examining it, bit by bit, with the most scrupulous care. Each had its separate price, of course, the total being £11,000.

"And this?" she asked, holding up the sleigh group and staring at it as a *religieuse* might regard a statue of the Madonna.

"£3,500!"

"Nonsense!"

Just the one abrupt word, nearly shouted at me. Then began an interminable argument. Were all London dealers cheats and rogues? I, of course, was not in that category, but I had been grievously misled! Three thousand five hundred for this? She would give me £2,000! It was useless to expect more. Believe it or not, I sat arguing with that woman from three o'clock in the afternoon till nine at night. After I had snatched a belated dinner, we recommenced at ten-thirty and all the time Frau Feist was belabouring me with words, shouting sarcasms and belittling Lord Ripon's treasures. I have haggled with all manner of people in several Continents,

but this woman was in a class by herself! Grimly I fought back, determined not to abate a penny of my price. She sat there in bed, with the sheets and blankets tossed by strenuous gestures, her little, expressive eyes flickering over me.

At midnight we were still arguing.

By one o'clock we were quarrelling.

At two o'clock she nearly fell out of bed, shaking her fist at me and calling me a robber.

At three I wiped the sweat from my forehead and decided to call it a day.

"In spite of my telegrams and letters," I exclaimed, "where the conditions were clearly set out, you have gone back on your agreement. I'm going to bed."

She screamed something as I went out of the door, but by that time one scream, more or less, meant nothing. The next afternoon exactly the same business began again, on the same stage. Right through the night—no dinner at all this time—and then, at two in the morning, capitulation! I have never in my life had such a fight: the woman was nothing less than a demon! Thankfully I wrote out an invoice, enumerating the items and their prices. Then came the modifications to which I had agreed.

"Total price, £10,500. Payment—£1,000 cash, £5,500, in ten days, and £4,000, in six months." Underneath I wrote "It is understood that the above articles have been sold without any guarantee whatsoever, except that they are the following numbers of the Marquis of Ripon's collections as shown in

his catalogue." Then followed the numbers, but when I presented the invoice for signature, Frau Feist sat up in bed and fairly yelled at me! In torrential German she explained she would see me eternally damned before she would sign!

"Pack up everything," I snapped at my assistant.

The woman's shouts were so penetrating and sustained that I wonder we weren't all thrown out of the hotel. However, she was the "star" guest, and paid accordingly. One by one the hampers were taken out into the passage, and I caught a glimpse of the frightened face of a chambermaid.

"You still refuse to sign?" I asked this terrible old woman.

"Absolutely!"

I bowed and left her. Before I had reached the end of the passage my assistant panted after me.

"She wants you."

Amazingly, in that one-minute interval, Frau Feist had become another woman. Worn out as I was, she looked as grim and strong as ever.

"Of course I will sign," she smiled, reaching for the invoice. "I was just trying you out. As a matter of fact, I have implicit confidence in you, Herr Duveen. You did quite rightly in sticking to your point: if you had given way I should have broken off the deal!"

Ignoring me entirely, she began to comb her iron-grey hair, examined herself in a small mirror and then pressed a bedside bell. When the maid appeared:

"Bring some breakfast, please. And make the coffee really hot, Élise."

By this time it was dawn and my client had become a charming and thoughtful hostess. As we ate, I realised that, in spite of her outrageous behaviour, she was a woman of breeding and good sense. She possessed a dual personality: in ordinary affairs she had a heart of gold, but when obsessed by the collecting mania became nothing less than a tigress. At such times all feelings of decency, friendship and honour—even her written promises—were sacrificed to the lust of trickery.

“To-day is Sunday,” she smiled, “and so my cheque for the first £1,000 cannot go through. You must remain here till Tuesday as my guest, when the money will have been paid in to your London account by my Berlin agent. Then you can safely leave the china with me.”

It was an excellent arrangement. I passed a very pleasant little holiday, and on Tuesday, having had a telegram from my bank, left Meran with feelings of satisfaction. After many months of careful negotiation, the deal had gone through! At the station there were more evidences of Frau Feist’s kindness: a great hamper of out-of-season fruit in my reserved compartment. After an uneventful trip, I arrived in London and found a pink envelope on my desk. It was from the Berlin dealer who had brought me into the affair in the first place. Casually I tore it open and was astounded to read:

“Frau Feist highly dissatisfied. She is bringing an action against you forthwith.”

Had I but known it, this was the commencement of litigation which continued for *twelve years* and ended, after the war, with a verdict in my favour. As my friend from the Hague had foretold, the museum "experts" and dealers in Germany who advised Frau Ermina swore that Lord Ripon's seven Dresden pieces—acknowledged by connoisseurs in Europe and America to be genuine and beyond dispute—were worthless imitations! It was only another example of chicanery of the meanest type. Thus, for the sake of selling seven pieces at £10,500, I had rendered myself liable to Lord Ripon for £25,000, and in addition was involved in a lawsuit for selling spurious antiques! All Ermina's protestations and promises to order other works of art running into thousands of pounds proved valueless.

It would take up too much space to go into the details of this long drawn-out affair and to write of the trick after trick which was played by the opposition, but the fact remains that litigation—especially in a foreign country—costs a great deal of money. My very simply worded contract with Frau Feist stood up against every attack of her often-changed lawyers, and one of the first things I did was to take over to Munich the remaining thirty-three pieces of Lord Ripon's forty, so that she could exercise her option of seeing and buying them. She was most eager to examine them and, to encourage me to come over while the legal battle was at its height, she actually invited me to stay at the Regina Hotel, in Munich. Travelling with my Paris manager, we arrived this

time with eight enormous baskets containing the china. I was conducted straight to Frau Ermina's suite.

"*Ach, mein lieber Duveen!*" she exclaimed, holding out her arms as though offering an embrace. "I am so happy you have come."

"You have the right to examine the china before I offer it to other clients," I replied, rather shortly.

"Ah, what energy! How hard you work!"

All the time her eyes were flickering over me; her words were just the barrage put down before the offensive commences. "I am so unhappy at what has occurred," she went on, "but you are too reasonable to fight a case in which all my experts are unanimous. The pieces are worthless!"

That touched me on a sore point.

"Who are these 'experts' of yours?" I demanded. "I'll wager there is not one reputable dealer in the whole crowd who will come out into the open and declare Lord Ripon's pieces worthless!"

"Will you really bet?"

"Of course! Ten to one!"

"Done!" she cried. "In English pounds."

"Who is your 'respectable' dealer?"

"Herr Wetter!"

Wetter was one of the principal members of a very important German art dealing firm: I could not believe it of him.

"Impossible!" I snorted.

"All right, then, I'll prove it. I'll ring him up this minute and you can listen-in on the other telephone."

After a little delay, Wetter came to the line.

"Ah, *mein lieber*," cried Ermina, "I hope I did not fetch you out of your bed. I want to say that I have seen Duveen and he maintains the things are perfectly genuine. Are you quite certain they are wrong?"

"Of course," came the reply. "*But you haven't told Duveen I said so?* You swore by the life of your husband you wouldn't!"

"*Wie können Sie es wagen so etwas zu denken*," she cried. "How dare you think such a thing!"

I paid up my £10 and went away. I felt I should stifle if I remained with that woman another moment. A few months later there was a sequel: I happened to meet the great German dealer in New York in the house of one of my relatives, and it was he who broached the subject of Frau Feist.

"Ah, my dear Duveen," said Wetter, "I'm so sorry to hear of all the trouble you've been having with that terrible woman. I told her she was mad: they were the finest pieces of Dresden porcelain I had ever seen."

"Really!" I exclaimed. "How very interesting. I heard you say—well, not quite that, on the telephone to her."

He stared at me as though at a ghost.

"The night she rang you up in Munich and asked you to confirm they were 'wrong'!" I insisted. "I was listening in."

He paled to the lips and could not utter one word. I smiled gently, turned away and have never spoken to him since. Oddly enough, "swearing by the life

of her husband" was one of Ermina's peculiarities. The last time she did it—(promising not to show a piece of valuable porcelain, a promise which she broke within two hours)—her husband was brought back dead from a gambling hall.

After the case had gone through two Courts of Appeal and I had won, I began to feel sorry for Ermina. German inflation was then at its height and I had sold in pounds: this meant she had to pay some quite unpronounceable sum in marks. But she fooled us after all, that woman. The Treaty of Versailles stipulated that German nationals owing money to the Allies were to pay their own Government in marks, while the German Government had to pay the creditors in gold. In the end the value of the marks Ermina paid was less than that of a used bus-ticket!

I now have the sad consolation of knowing that these seven Ripon pieces of Dresden are ranked as the finest pieces in the collection of the late Frau Feist. Let the dead rest: she always meant well when you were with her, and had a good heart. But her mind was none of the strongest, and the vultures who surrounded her were responsible for many of the crazy things she did.

CHAPTER VII

THE BLACKMAILING OF AN EXPERT

IN 1905 there was in London a very brilliant and debonair young man who was an acknowledged authority on art and, in particular, on old armour. He was, of course, in close touch with all the big dealers and buyers in London and the United States, and it is in this connection that he was drawn into one of the biggest art "ramps" of the century. Charming in manner and good-looking, he was an even greater expert on feminine beauty and vintage wine. It was commonly said that women could never say "No" to him. This was then an even more expensive game than it is to-day. However, by one shift and another, he managed very well until he became mixed up in a rather unsavoury affair which ended in his being heavily blackmailed. He dared not let the truth leak out. A very suave gentleman in top hat and morning coat came into his office unannounced one day.

"Good day, Mr. Melmett," he said. "No—please don't say anything you'd regret. But I've just come to say I am tired of waiting. If you can't put down £800 on the 15th instant I'm afraid—well, I shall have to take other measures."

The wretched young man tried to quibble, but it was useless. The shark had got him, and when the oily gentleman bowed himself out, Hugh Melmett sat down to look ruin in the face. Every one of his various accounts were already overdrawn and there was no one from whom he could hope to extract £800 in less than a week. Moreover, it was January—the worst period of the year for art deals. Of a sudden an idea flashed into his mind. Yes, there was one man who could help. If he would! Twenty minutes later he was sitting in the ante-room of one of the rising dictators of the art world. Let me camouflage this tall, dark-eyed and well-dressed man under the name of George. The young man waited for three quarters of an hour before the magnate condescended to see him, and when he was admitted he met the abrupt question.

“Well, what can I do for you? I’m in a hurry.”

Melmett screwed himself up to the point.

“Fact is I’m in the devil of a mess, old man. I want you to lend me £800.”

The great dealer leaned back and gave a little whistle.

“What? After all the money I’ve lent you from time to time? No, Hugh, I won’t. You are just a bucket without a bottom, and the sooner you stop chucking money about the better.”

“For God’s sake don’t talk like that,” gasped the young man. “I’m right up against it: if you won’t help I’ll have to flit to-day.”

The dealer regarded him from under his eyebrows. The fellow was pretty desperate, then? Desperate men had their use, especially when they were clever and had a circle of rich friends. Hugh made one last effort.

"Look: you have done some pretty big deals through me in the past, and you know quite well that when the big Americans come over in May and June I shall put a lot more in your way. Help me this once and you'll make hundreds per cent. on your money within the year!"

"My boy," said the dealer, "I am not going to lend you any more money, but if you have anything to sell I'll give you a good price. Then my partners won't be able to grouse about my financing you. What have you got?"

"The two Gothic suits of armour?" was the hopeful reply.

"You call *that* £800!"

"They are all I have, and are worth money. Besides, Bordeaux is coming over from New York in the spring and he has specially asked me to look out for old armour for his collection."

"How long have you had them?"

"Less than a fortnight."

"Have you told Bordeaux about them?"

"No, because he never buys by letter, and I wanted to keep them out of sight till he was in London. Then I should get a friend to offer them to him, and, since Bordeaux always asks my advice, it would be a certain sale."

The big dealer cut the end off a cigar with precision. His face gave no inkling of what was in his mind. Then:

"But I saw them at Halberd's shop, didn't I?"

"Yes: I let you see them because—well, you are one of my best friends."

The dealer nodded slowly. He took up the telephone and called a number.

"That you, Halberd? Good. About those two suits of armour you've got—you know the ones I mean? What would it cost to have them put in good repair?"

The virtuoso-restorer at the other end of the wire chuckled.

"Nothing at all, Mr. George. Twenty pounds at the most. But listen: if you don't mind spending a little bit of money I would make them worth twenty thousand pounds!"

The big dealer glanced across at Hugh who was sitting staring out of the window.

"Uh-huh?" he grunted. "I like the sound of that. Look, Halberd, call in to-morrow at 3 o'clock and have a chat about it. G'bye."

He pushed a bell, and, as his secretary entered, said:

"Just make out a cheque to Mr. Hugh Melmett for £800 and bring it to me at once, please."

What followed is typical of the methods by which George rose to a position of some eminence in the world of art dealing. Opportunity existed only to be seized and twisted so that the last penny could

be extracted from the advantage of the moment. Presently the cheque was brought in. George sat turning it over in his hands, elbows on the big desk. He fixed Hugh Melmett with a speculative eye.

"This £800 must be *earned*," he said softly. "Those suits of armour must be sold to Bordeaux at a big price."

Hugh shifted uncomfortably on his chair.

"Of course. Maybe for a thousand or eleven hundred pounds. I don't think I could conscientiously advise him to pay more."

"Conscientious nothing!" snapped the dealer roughly. "You'll do your stuff as I say or——" He made a motion of tearing the cheque in two. "Remember, I'm not the kind of fool to go and make mistakes. Bordeaux will thank me for letting him buy that armour!"

"What do you think of asking?"

"Not your business, my boy. I must have a chat with Halberd first. Now, are you going to be foolish, or take your profit while you can?"

Hugh Melmett was trapped and knew it. Money he had to have. He gulped once or twice, then nodded.

"All right. I accept. But, for Heaven's sake, George, don't go too far or else we shall both be in pretty serious trouble."

The art expert laughed and clapped him on the back.

"Think I don't know my own business after all these years? Don't be silly, boy! When I do a bit

of *Schlentering* (jargon: selling art fakes) I don't make mistakes. D'you know what I'd do if anything went wrong?" He smacked a fist into his open palm and leaned across the desk. "First of all I'd bluff Bordeaux by demanding if he believed such scandalous stories put about by jealous dealers. I'd follow that up by asking him how much profit he'd take on the suits of armour. I'd offer to buy 'em back at his own price! That stops 'em, my boy. I'd like to see the man—dealer or expert—who can lose me a good customer! They are all afraid of me because I'm too smart: I've put more than one 'expert' where he belongs and now the rest leave me alone."

He signed the cheque and got to his feet.

"There you are, Hugh. Give me a receipt, and for God's sake try and keep out of trouble in future. I don't like working with fools. It is too dangerous!"

Next day at three o'clock Halberd, the restorer, was shown into George's office. The great man smiled amiably, indicated a chair and offered a cigar. Halberd was often the creator of "works of art" which had fetched high prices. Now he produced a small parcel and took from it a steel gauntlet.

"This," he explained, "is the gauntlet of one of the suits of armour. I'd like to show you what can be done to them. Now here is a finger of an old damascened gauntlet from my little collection and I have discovered a special way of gilding to look like inlay. I can make these two suits so exactly like this finger that I defy anyone to spot the difference. You realise that, if I did this, the suits would

be worth about £20,000. I showed it to Melmett, but the fool was afraid."

"So am I," said George. "For the simple reason you cannot do work like this old stuff. I'd bet quite a lot you couldn't take me in if you worked on the gauntlet to make it match this finger."

The restorer leaned back and laughed quietly.

"You'd lose, Mr. George." Taking a second gauntlet from the parcel he fitted the damascened finger on to it. "I've deceived you, *because I have already worked on this 'old' finger and the 'old' gauntlet to which it belongs!*"

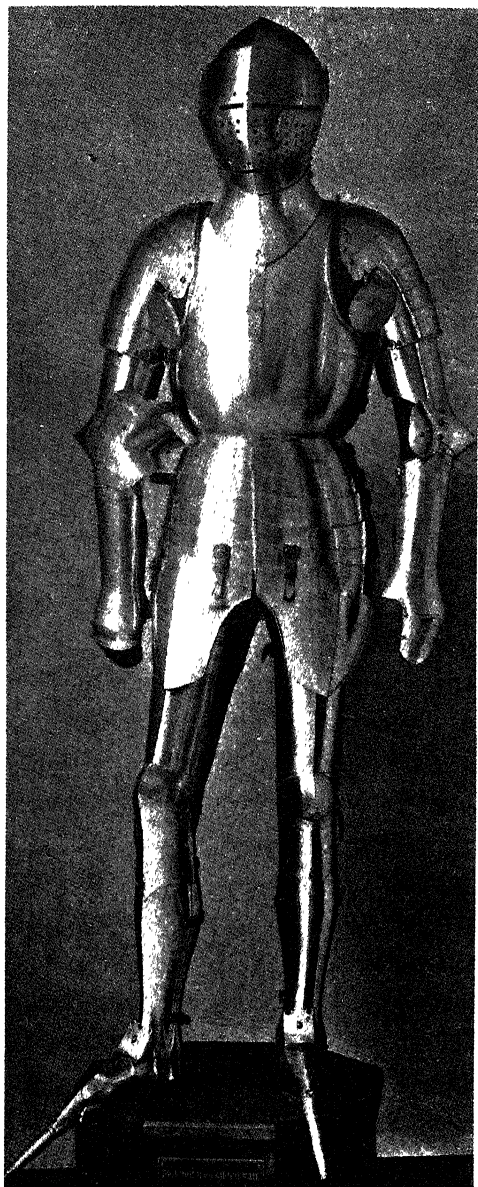
The dealer was visibly taken aback. He examined the "old damascene" work with care.

"My God!" he muttered. Then, after an interval. "Halberd, how much d'you want to make the two suits like this?"

"Five hundred pounds."

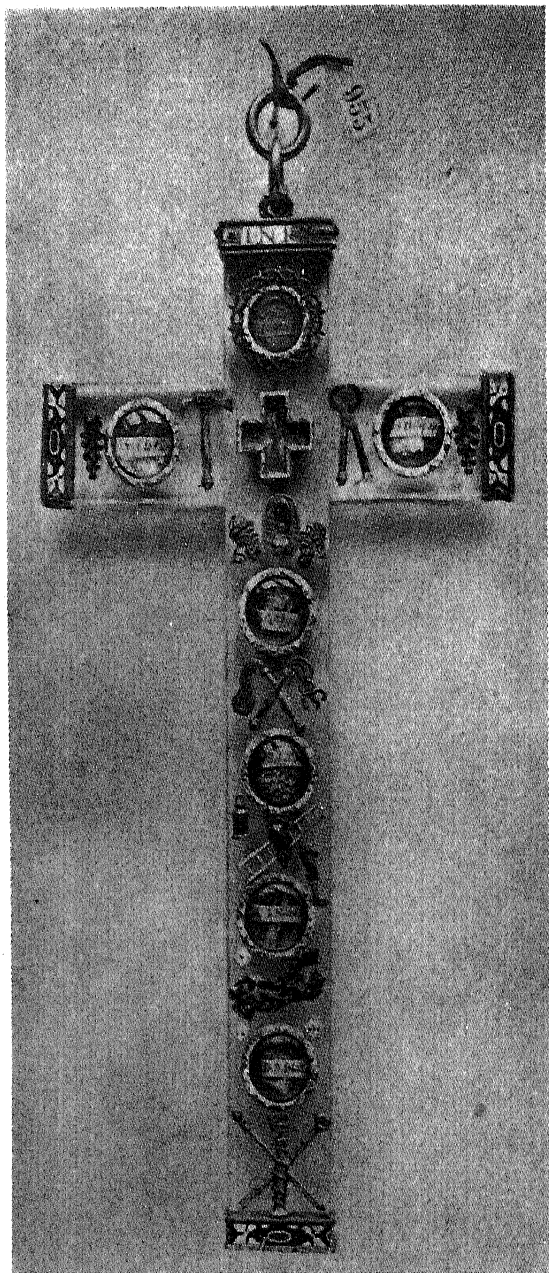
"Done. But on condition that they are ready in six weeks' time," said this man of Napoleonic decisions.

After the restorer had gone, the great dealer leaned back and gazed at the ceiling. Once he consulted a pocket-book and made a note of a date in mid-May. On that day, according to his private information from New York, Mr. Patrick P. Bordeaux would set sail for London. His show-rooms would then be crowded by Americans and others ready to acquire rare and beautiful things. Having created exactly the right atmosphere he would see to it that Patrick P. advanced "up the garden path" to



GOthic SUIT OF ARMOUR
A North Italian Suit

[See Chapter/VII



THE FAMOUS GUZMAN CROSS

In the Pierpont Morgan Collection; richly decorated with Symbolic Emblems of the Passion. The original ebony cross became rock crystal by the combined magic of a millionaire's wish and a dealer's "cleverness"

the tune of many thousands! Within the stipulated period the two suits of armour were delivered, and George set them up in a special show-case, electrically lit and lined with red velvet. Scintillating with the gold of damascened work, they looked to be exact replicas of armour such as is found rarely even in the great museums or princely collections of the world. When all was ready George telephoned Hugh Melmett, made an appointment at the show-rooms, and took the wise precaution of having the helmets removed.

"Now, Hugh," he said, standing before the cases, "you are an expert on armour. What do you think of *these*? The helmets are just being cleaned. Better than your old £800 suits, eh?"

"Marvellous," murmured the young man in admiration. "About 1480 and Verona, I should say."

The great man beamed upon him.

"Look at 'em closely, my boy. Examine 'em." He opened the doors of the show-case, while Melmett scrutinised each piece.

"Wonderful," he sighed.

"That is what Bordeaux will say!"

Hugh examined the suits more carefully, then he suddenly spun round.

"What? Are these mine?"

George nodded complacently.

"But that damascening?" It's not inlaid: only gilt! What is going to happen if a collector tries it with acids?"

"Rubbish! Who is going to have the impertinence to try them with acid once they are sold into a private collection? *Remember, they will be guaranteed by you and me!*"

"God! You won't ask me to do that," gasped Melmett. "If it came out, I'd be ruined for life."

"Who is going to spill the story?" demanded the dealer. "You? Halberd, who has had five hundred quid? Or me?"

"But the thing is just a swindle!"

The dealer pushed his blood-injected face close to Hugh. His voice was trembling with passion.

"Swindle? You talk to me like that? You come whining for £800 and then refuse to pay the bill? Listen to me, Melmett: if you back out now I'll ruin you just as surely as I've ruined others who got in my way. What about my telling Sir Hubert exactly why you valued his black Chinese vases so low as £1,500? He will tumble to your game right away: it will be the end of you!"

There were little drops of perspiration on Melmett's face and his eyes turned this way and that like those of an animal seeking escape. This man was without pity. There was no way out of the trap now.

"As you like," he mumbled.

"Don't you worry any more," urged the dealer, satisfied now he had got his way. "Leave the details to me. Bordeaux is arriving at Liverpool to-morrow morning and after I have spun him the yarn all

you will have to do is to put a formal O.K. on the armour. Incidentally, if I get my price there is £3,000 in it for you. How's that?"

In spite of this large *douceur*, Hugh Melmett was acutely anxious and miserable. He could do nothing, but had to wait until George put the deal through. Two days later Patrick P. Bordeaux walked into the London show-rooms of Mr. George, intent on adding to his already fine collection.

"You wrote to me about some helmets," he explained. "I'd like to have a look at them."

George produced the helmets which pleased Bordeaux and he bought them at the very moderate price which the wily George always asked for things which could be got elsewhere.

"Haven't you got something really important for me?" he asked. "I've written to all the specialists in Europe but it seems extraordinarily hard to find really fine armour nowadays."

"Well," replied the dealer, pulling thoughtfully at his chin, "I've got two wonderful suits here at the moment. But they aren't for sale: my partner promised to let Pierpont Morgan see anything we had in that line. I'll let you see them if you say nothing about it: as a connoisseur I know you will be delighted at their workmanship."

When Patrick P. Bordeaux caught sight of the show-case in which the suits of armour glittered, resplendent and shining, he uttered an exclamation of delight.

The American collector stood entranced. For a

long time there was silence: the great dealer was far too clever a psychologist to break it.

"Grand. The finest I have ever seen for sale anywhere," said the collector at last.

"Yes. I have never succeeded in getting anything as good in my whole career."

Bordeaux turned on George and took him by the arm, purpose in every line of his face.

"Look here, my friend, you *must* sell these to me. I'll pay anything you like, but have them I must."

The dealer raised his eyes in pained protest.

"Oh, quite impossible, Mr. Bordeaux. We should get into serious trouble if Mr. Morgan knew we had not given him the first refusal."

"To hell with Morgan," snapped the collector. "Has he got first call on anything you get?" No? Well then, if your other clients' interests only come in after you have satisfied Morgan, I'll take my custom elsewhere. It won't do you much good if this sort of thing becomes known!"

"Come, you surely can't issue an ultimatum like that," protested the dealer. "What would you think if you were in Morgan's place and I sold the pieces to someone else?"

After a great deal of argument, in which Patrick P. Bordeaux became more thrustful and eager to gain possession of this coveted armour, the great dealer admitted himself vanquished. By astute trickery and a diabolical knowledge of human nature he had now got Bordeaux where he wanted him. He gave a sigh and shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well, Mr. Bordeaux. You have convinced me that you have equal rights with Mr. Morgan. You shall have the suits for £32,000, but I do beg of you to try to keep the matter secret. Pierpont Morgan is an awkward customer to deal with: if he knew of this affair he would most certainly close his account with us."

"£32,000, eh?" gasped the American. "That's a tall figure!"

Then followed a superb piece of salesmanship possible only to a really great man.

"Please don't think I am trying to put the price up on you, Mr. Bordeaux. If I had said £50,000 you would know in your heart it was not too much. They are absolutely unique. I know many great collectors who would jump at this bargain, but I also know that if I did not *make* you buy these suits you would never forgive me. I know what they mean to you better than you do yourself. You must take them!"

The American stood and stared. Then he laughed, but George knew he had won.

"You have the cool cheek to order me to buy this armour at £32,000?"

"I do. If you won't, I'll not say another word and I am sorry to have made myself ridiculous on your account. Maybe you will remember my words one day."

The dealer moved towards the door, but Patrick P. did not follow him. His gaze was riveted on those two resplendent and shining suits. He spoke again.

"Don't misunderstand me, George. I was only pulling your leg. I've never seen better armour than this and I take my hat off to you. You are a great man. I'll take the suits at your own price and write the cheque out now!"

"And I'm truly sorry," replied the art expert. "I can never resist buying beautiful things: that is the only pleasure I get out of them because they are always snapped up by lucky connoisseurs like you."

"Oh, by the way, has Hugh Melmett seen these?" asked the American, as an afterthought.

"Yes. He asked me to allow him to illustrate them in his next work, but I refused because they belonged to a minor foreign royalty. Actually they were located in a lumber room in a shooting lodge which had not been used for twenty years and, as the discovery was not made known to the State, the armour was sold privately. They were in an excellent state of preservation."

When the American left, George telephoned to Hugh Melmett and made it plain that the deal had gone through. All Melmett now had to do was personally to guarantee the genuineness of the armour. There was no way out of the impasse, and so presently Patrick P. Bordeaux, the great New York collector, left England in triumph. He had captured this enormous prize from under the very nose of the illustrious Pierpont Morgan, and that alone doubled the value of his deal!

More than twenty years passed. Hugh Melmett died at an unexpectedly early age, and in the interval

Patrick P. had become rather less enamoured of his suits of armour. Once or twice sceptical friends and connoisseurs had cast doubts upon their authenticity, but in the interval he had become immensely rich and his collection had expanded accordingly. After all, what was £32,000 to him? Nor had George stood still. He was by now one of the richest men in his business, but he did not like the way his client now and again referred to those suits of armour. The more he thought about Bordeaux's attitude, the less he liked it. It would never do for there to be a scandal even after this lapse of time. He knew that Bordeaux had long been trying to find for his picture gallery an important work by a great Italian master, and at this moment there was just such a picture in his show-room. His cunning mind examined the problem from every angle, and at last he hit on a plan which should clear him in the event of trouble. The American was, as usual, coming to London in the early summer, so George let it be known through devious channels that the canvas Patrick P. wanted was waiting purchase. The collector snapped at the lure.

"Before you see this picture which, incidentally, is probably the best the artist ever painted," began George, when the American arrived, "I want you to do me a favour. You remember those suits of armour you got from me twenty years ago? I've always regretted losing them, and I want to buy them back. You paid me £32,000. I'll give you £40,000 on the nail. How's that?"

For a moment Patrick P. was staggered. The doubts of past years were quelled by a prospective profit of £8,000. Damn it, the things *must* be genuine!

"Done!" he said, rather regretfully, because he had a genuine love of the beautiful. "Now then, George, let's have a look at this picture of yours."

He had a look which resulted in his buying it for no less than £170,000. He surely had been "done," *because the astute George had added £50,000 to the selling price!* Thus the great dealer made £10,000 more and had got the armour into the bargain! That it was comparatively worthless only stimulated his imagination.

This deal has a remarkably interesting sequel. There was—and still is—a not very well known collector in the United States called Edward L. Hennage who used to holiday in Europe. When in London he ventured into the show-rooms owned by Mr. George just to have a look round: most of the things were beyond his purse. But the great Mr. George took to him at once. Quite soon they became very friendly and one day Hennage noticed two suits of damascened armour.

"How lovely!" he remarked.

"Well, yes," replied the dealer. "But they have a curious history. They were sold to me by Hugh Melmett; he's dead now, poor devil! I sold them to Patrick P. Bordeaux for £32,000 as damascened, but when I found out that the damascened work was only surface gilding I bought them back for £40,000! They are unique, of course, and quite

worth the money, but I wanted them back because I made a mistake about the damascening. In fact I intend to leave them to a museum."

Hennage thought deeply for a moment. His eye returned to rest affectionately on the "damascened" armour.

"When you were in the States, do you remember coming to my place and admiring a particularly fine shield by Benvenuto Cellini? It really is a masterpiece."

"Of course," replied the dealer, recalling exactly the very clever fake by the restorer, Halberd, which he had known on the market for at least twenty-five years. "I do indeed. A wonderful piece!"

"Well now," exclaimed Hennage excitedly. "Can't we do a deal? I'll give you—let's see—£20,000 and the shield if you will let me have this armour."

"You would part with your Cellini?" exclaimed the dealer, in simulated amazement. "Done, Mr. Hennage. I have got the best of the bargain!"

Edward L. grinned delightedly to himself. *He* had got the best bargain! The deal was clinched and that great man, George, had made a clear profit of £30,000 in the "taking back" of his fakes. He also gained possession of a faked shield which he destroyed as soon as it arrived. Now those famous suits of medieval armour rest in an American collector's gallery. On his death they are destined to stand, the admiration of all beholders, in one of the most famous of Eastern American museums.

CHAPTER VIII

HOW PIERPONT MORGAN BOUGHT "MISTAKES"

IN a charming old manor house in Surrey there lives to-day that Nestor of all art experts and connoisseurs, the internationally known Dr. George C. Williamson who became one of the firmest friends of the great John Pierpont Morgan, the elder, during the latter years of his life. The number of the doctor's works on Art and many other matters would fill a good-sized catalogue. Perhaps the most interesting, from the layman's point of view, is his *Stories of an Expert*. This contains stories in which, to those conversant with the inner history of art collecting during the last half century, solutions are provided to many puzzling secrets.

Dr. Williamson has not stressed his learning and acumen which decided the fate of many enormous transactions, but some of these adventures connected with Morgan's collections are fragments of secret history known only to a select few of the initiated.

The doctor's first meeting with the multi-millionaire was due to an interesting little "game" played on Morgan. Incidentally, this shows him in a new light, as something more than the pitiless financier who surpassed the Goulds, Mackays and the Vanderbilts, and who, at the time of his death, controlled interests totalling, I believe, some 22,000 millions of dollars!

There is, to my mind, no doubt that Morgan always intended his vast collections to be left to and preserved by the American nation. At the cost of millions of pounds his agents had ransacked the artistic treasure houses of Europe and the East. When he died in 1913, lovers of art were astounded to hear that his son, as heir and executor, had decided to sell several portions of these collections, many of which were then on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of New York. Only the outbreak of the world war drowned the chorus of dismay, but by the terms of the will John Pierpont Morgan, Junior, was entirely within his rights in breaking up the finest collections the world has ever seen. This might justly be compared with that other great artistic tragedy, the dispersal by the Commonwealth of the carefully chosen treasures of King Charles I. The Chinese porcelains, the French decorative works of art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the incomparable painted room by Fragonard were sold for approximately £2,000,000. The tapestry collection was also sold at that time, the finest piece being the large fifteenth century panel depicting "The Adoration of God the Father," valued at £100,000. Incidentally, this panel had been the cause of the famous *cause célèbre* between the late Jacques Seligmann, of Paris, and Duveen Brothers. For several years Morgan had lent this panel, together with some of his special treasures, to the Victoria and Albert Museum, because the United States Treasury would not allow him to import

them without paying the 60 per cent duty then levied on old works of art. The latest dispersal is the sale of many unique "Old Masters," and that of the unmatched collection of miniatures.

Dr. Williamson, like many other lovers of beauty, had often longed for an opportunity to examine Morgan's fine collection of miniatures in his London house at Princes Gate, and at last, after some long endeavour, Mr. Douglas, the secretary, wrote to say that if he would come on a certain morning he could look over them at his leisure. Morgan would be away on that day, and it was made clear that Dr. Williamson was on no account to make any notes for subsequent publication. At the sight of such wonderful things the doctor was overwhelmed: here were delicate masterpieces in endless numbers such as he had never hoped to see. He became so engrossed that presently he forgot the existence of the secretary and Henry, the faithful butler, who remained in the room. Presently he was staring at the Fauconberg miniature, framed in diamonds. He stretched out a hand, then withdrew it. Without looking round he said:

"May I take this to the window to look at it more closely?"

"Do what you like," came a gruff bark in his ear.

Williamson spun round. There was the great emperor of finance himself, the autocrat of the world's sale rooms. Dr. Williamson had not seen him before, but there could be no possible mistake as to his identity. The secretary and Henry, who certainly were there a moment before, had vanished.

A grim smile played round the great man's mouth as he watched the doctor's amazement.

"Know who I am, eh? So you are the man who never makes a mistake!"

"I-I've never said that," stammered the connoisseur.

"You *admit* to mistakes, then?"

"A good few," said the candid Williamson. "But I've owned up every time I found myself in the wrong."

Morgan gave a hoot of laughter.

"Huh! You are the first expert to admit to me that he is fallible. You're more modest than your colleague Dr. Bode!"

Again he gave a rough guffaw, while the doctor tried to explain that the man who says he has never made a mistake is either lying, or has never achieved anything.

"Quite right," snapped Morgan. "*I've* made many enough in my own affairs." It was clear he meant that if *he* had made some, others must have made many more. His manner changed and the smile disappeared. "Have you found any mistakes among these?"

Williamson, overawed by the dynamic personality of the multi-millionaire, tried to evade the point by speaking of the quality and beauty of the collection. Morgan saw through him instantly.

"Come on, out with it. What d'you think I let you in here for? That Fauconberg miniature, for instance?"

"Well—er——" stammered the unhappy doctor, "I'm afraid you have been imposed upon here."

"How?"

"I see that on the back of the gold case Cosway's name is engraved. It is not by Cosway at all!"

Morgan's eyebrows shot up into his hair.

"You seem pretty sure! Do you set your opinion against the best European connoisseurs?"

"Yes, Mr. Morgan. You see, I know the real artist. If you'd care to hear—it is rather a long tale, I'm afraid——"

Morgan thrust his visitor into a chair and lit a cigar.

"Go on, man. Tell me."

"A few years ago a certain lady came to me in London bringing with her this miniature. She explained that she was a direct descendant of the Countess of Fauconberg and that a dealer had offered to buy it at a big price.

"‘Now, Dr. Williamson,’ she said, ‘the dealer is so foolish as to require your written guarantee that this is by Cosway. It seems so stupid, because we have had this in our family ever since Cosway painted it! Would you mind giving me a written assurance: it is just a formality?’

"‘Well, Mr. Morgan,’ continued Williamson, ‘the moment I had this miniature in my hand I knew it was not Cosway's work. I dare not give any such guarantee, and I explained to her as gently as I could that she was placing me in a very awkward position.

"‘Not Cosway's work?’ cried the lady. ‘Don't be silly. Three dealers have seen it, and they are all agreed. It is only because this man Hogg hopes to sell it again at a high figure in America that he wants your assurance!’

"I shook my head.

"So sure am I that Cosway never touched this, that I will write down a name on a piece of paper and seal it in an envelope. Call in an expert, take the miniature to pieces and you will almost certainly find that artist's name on the back!"

"At that the lady nearly had hysterics," said the doctor. "She pleaded, she wept, she called me everything she could think of, and then went away. Next day she came back and renewed her attack, but I refused to give any guarantee.

"The whole world knows this is a Cosway,' she exclaimed, 'and you are just doing this to stop Mr. Hogg from paying me a good price. I need the money so badly. In fact, if I don't get it——' She burst into tears and then rounded on me. 'Put your opinion into writing then. Prove your silly talk! You'll only make a fool of yourself!'

"Well, Mr. Morgan," said Williamson, looking at the quiet, grim-jawed figure in the armchair, "I wrote one word on a piece of paper, put it in an envelope, and we had the miniature taken to pieces by Mr. Payne, a well known specialist in that sort of work. On the back was found an inscription in the artist's handwriting: '*Jane Chesshyre, Countess of Fauconberg, drawn in 1791, the year of her marriage with Charles, Earl of Fauconberg, one of the Lords of the Bed-Chamber to His Majesty George III. By Mr. Jean, miniature painter.*' There were, moreover, on the extreme edge of the front of the miniature, the artist's initials which until then had been hidden by the frame!"

Morgan fixed the doctor with an intimidating stare, his cigar at an upthrust angle.

"And the name you had written?"

"Jean, Mr. Morgan. The lady nearly fainted when she opened the envelope. I asked her to let me photograph the artist's signature in order to add it to my collection, and she agreed. Then, I'm afraid, her control broke down: she must have been in very great trouble. She told me that Mr. Hogg 'believed' it to be a Cosway and that if I would guarantee it, I should receive £200 from him and an additional £100 from her share of the proceeds. In her then state of mind, I don't think she realised she was trying to bribe me."

There was a long silence in the room. Dr. Williamson stood, twisting the Jean in his hand, feeling extraordinarily uncomfortable. At last Pierpont Morgan spoke.

"I did buy it through Hogg, and I paid a thumping price. Bring me that photograph of Jean's signature to-morrow. Now come and have some lunch."

At the table, Morgan showed another side of his complex personality. He became the attentive host, and, though he himself ate nothing more than a few strawberries, saw that his guest was served with the best of everything. Half way through the meal he interrupted Williamson by another startling broadside.

"I've been looking for a mind like yours!" he barked. "I would like you to make catalogues of my collections so that, if anything happens to the originals"—he hesitated, as though he had a premonition of what might occur after his death—"if

they should ever be dispersed, students can work as though they had the originals in front of them."

Williamson was staggered, but Morgan swept out his arm with a compelling gesture.

"Oh, I know the difficulties, but *you* can do it! I looked over your works before you came to-day. No, don't interrupt me: I want fine colour plates, and if colour blocks won't do, then the work will have to be done by hand. Bring together the best artists you can find, the most suitable man for each type of illustration. It will be a kind of human photography!"

Swept away by Morgan's extraordinary personality and enthusiasm, Williamson felt that nothing was impossible. He saw clearly how his new friend's ideals could be realised, but also envisaged the almost fantastic cost of the project. When he mentioned this, Morgan produced a cheque book and banged it on the table.

"*Money?* I don't care about the cost! You will have to make journeys to Europe, to America and the East—fifty journeys. What does that matter? I'll see your London account is kept in credit, and you do the rest. Track up on the history of each piece: I've been supplied with plenty of 'Histories' which I know are false, and you must dig down to the truth. Understand me, Williamson, when I say that the job will take years. No matter, train your successors and I'll arrange so they can work on!"

From this day the two men became intimates. Pierpont Morgan knew that here at last was one man whom he could trust to the utmost. In his joy at having found unbiased honesty, the great

financier revealed that human side to his character which he hid from most of his friends. At once the doctor set to work to organize his little army of some fifty artists. Every detail of the compilation of those vast catalogues was executed in the most perfect style. Even the vellum on which the text and illustrations were produced was brought from the famous works from which the Vatican was supplied.

The researches, journeying and discoveries which Dr. Williamson made during the next eight years would fill half a dozen volumes. His adventures would make greater stories than any of my own, but unfortunately, it would be as dangerous to relate many of them as it would be to let off a rocket in a dynamite factory! I can, however, make known the more intimate details of the sale of the famous Guzman rock-crystal cross which hitherto have been kept strictly secret for various reasons. The kindly savant has so often told and retold me the story that it forms another lively picture in my mind. Some of the details I knew already from other intimate sources. The cross is beautifully reproduced in colours in Dr. Williamson's *Book of Morgan Jewels*, and is very well known indeed to collectors, the world over.

Morgan had let it be known, however, that he particularly wanted to acquire some important and valuable object in rock crystal, and here let me say that when Morgan wanted a thing the art dealers of Europe and America got very busy indeed. Strategy, tact, intrigue and methods far worse came into play to satisfy the commands of this Croesus.

So it was that about ten months later Pierpont Morgan had news that M. Barly, of Paris, had managed to obtain a magnificent crystal cross. Barly, the hero of the ivory Riesener table episode mentioned in a previous story, was one of the astutest men in the art world. He outstripped dealers, fakers and connoisseurs by sheer imaginative and ruthless ability and, having had previous dealings with Morgan, knew he could name his own price for an object which really appealed to the multi-millionaire. One day the great man himself strolled into Barly's show-rooms in Paris, grunted "Good morning" and began a slow march round the various cases.

"In my room at the back," murmured the Frenchman, "I have something really worth looking at. A rock crystal cross."

Together they went into this tiny private show-room which was covered with green Italian Gothic velvet worth probably £50 a yard: there in a perfectly plain glass case on a velvet pillar, stood a marvellous crystal cross. Morgan looked at it without speaking, and the dealer knew his man far too well to risk any eulogies. The cross was well worth looking at: a magnificent block of crystal in which were set small sixteenth century gold-enamel reliquaries and all the emblems of the Passion wrought in fine chased gold. Moreover, the curtains had been arranged cunningly so that a shaft of light lay upon the cross which seemed to glow by some inner fire of its own. At last Morgan drew up a chair and sat down, still staring at this lovely object and still not saying one word.

Suddenly the millionaire jerked up his head and instantly the dealer interpreted the question.

“£30,000, Mr. Morgan.”

His client merely nodded towards the door and got up, while Barly reverently removed the cross from the case and carried it out himself to Morgan’s car. Just as Barly was bowing and murmuring farewells, Morgan shot three words at him.

“To-morrow morning, Bristol.”

Barly said afterwards this was the only time he had seen Morgan so excited that he could scarcely speak. Next day the dealer arrived at the Hotel Bristol and waited for half an hour while the great man was disposing of the financial affairs of America by a few nods and grunts. When he saw Barly, Morgan snapped:

“Where d’you get it?”

“Ah, Meestaire Morgan,” exclaimed the dealer, throwing up dramatic eyes and arms. “This cross was in about the year 1550 made for the family of Guzman, in Spain. There is no other like her anywhere. Unique, yes! Through centuries she stay in that family until now, at last, my agents get her. For more than three hundred and fifty year she is treated like a Holy Relic, guarded always from the common gaze.”

Morgan gazed morosely at him and then said:

“How is it that the crystal is so absolutely perfect?”

“Ah, you are clever! You observe always! She has been kept in a velvet case so that she has remained in a virgin condition!”

“Well,” replied Morgan, terminating the interview

with characteristic abruptness, "you have just missed my paying date. You'll get your money next year!"

The wonderful crystal cross was accorded a place of honour amongst the great financier's jewel collection, and, some time later, he asked Dr. Williamson to include it in the *Book of Jewels* which was then being prepared. Williamson held the cross in his hands, turning it and admiring the beautiful enamelling. It was lovely enough, he thought: too lovely! Years of experience told him never to be deceived by mere beauty, although this work of art interested him particularly because he himself was connected with the Spanish family of Guzman.

"Do you like it?" demanded Morgan, watching him like a hawk.

"Yes. Oh, yes. It is marvellous!"

"Come on: what's the matter with it?"

Williamson hesitated before undeceiving and hurting his friend whom, he knew, was wrapped up in this fragment of crystal. Then he sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm afraid it is a fake! It looks too new and unblemished."

"It was always kept in its case," snapped Morgan.

"But I trust you before any other man. Go to Spain at once and find out all about that crystal."

The doctor took a photograph and a coloured reproduction with him to Spain and within a very short time discovered that the cross had been for centuries in possession of the Guzmans, then it had disappeared in some mysterious fashion. A Spanish

general and a man-servant had played a part in this transference, but in Leon Williamson obtained a vital clue from a ninety year old lady who had known the cross as a child.

"I think that this is the same cross," she said, "and yet it is different. In this photograph it is glass: when I knew it the body was of ebony."

Williamson's next problem was to find how the "glass" had been substituted; he traced the appearance of the crucifix through various private collections, and found that the old lady was right. Originally the cross *had* been of ebony! Finally it had gone to Paris, and there the trail was lost. Still Williamson persevered in his search and at last decided to tackle M. Barly himself. With what he already knew, he might force the dealer's hand.

"Yes," Barly admitted, when he gauged the doctor's knowledge, "there was a—what shall I say—a reconstruction. Why not, *mon cher*? Meestaire Morgan want a crystal and I find him. He is not quite complete. No!" He smiled broadly, and pressed the doctor's arm. "But my client must not be disappointed, nor must other dealers outwit me. If I had not sold that rock of crystal someone else would; the difference is that then fools would have got the money!"

"How was it done?" asked Williamson.

"Aha!" said Barly with childish pride. "I take the ebony cross to the good M. André, père. She has small cavities for relics and some very fine gold enamel work. André know his business! He make a superb crystal cross, he inset the enamelling—so! *Et voilà* !

The old ebony cross I myself burn to ashes. Of proof there remains nothing at all, *mon ami!*" Then, laying his hand on the doctor's shoulder, he added: "My dear, dear Doctor, you will not harm me with Morgan, will you?" He hesitated a moment, began to say something, but evidently changed his mind. Just as he was leaving for London, Williamson received an envelope with 25 bank notes of fr.1,000 each in it. No letter! He handed it back to the bearer, saying, "Not for me, a mistake."

Williamson did not feel equal to such "cleverness": the affair was nothing less than a swindle. All the way back to London he pondered his course of action. Ought he to tell Morgan the truth? And what would happen if he did? Would it not be kinder to let the financier think he had secured a genuine and very valuable antique? No sooner had he come into Morgan's study than a question hit him like a bullet: "Well? Fake or not?"

The doctor nerved himself for the ordeal.

"I'm afraid it is. A very great pity, but you must remember that this does not detract from the beauty of the relic."

He told Morgan the whole story, whereat the financier nodded and smiled rather grimly.

"Good thing you're an honest man, Williamson. I've just had a three page telegram from Barly telling me exactly the same story. The fellow is a damned scamp, but he is so clever I cannot do without him!"

The doctor wiped the perspiration from his forehead and blessed the instinct which made him tell

the truth. Though he had lost nothing by frankness, the incident made him tremble to think what might happen if he tried to interfere and give an unbiased opinion on some of the "treasures" foisted on his patron by certain art dealers. The grudgingly appreciated disclosure of the true history of this crystal cross had another effect: an important reliquary was included in Morgan's *Book of Jewels* which gave the doctor even more uneasiness as to its authenticity. On that point, however, I must remain for ever silent. There are some things too dangerous to talk of or write about!

Before Pierpont Morgan died, six of the catalogues arranged by Dr. Williamson and his assistants were finished, and preparations for two more were almost complete. The first to be completed described and illustrated the collection of miniatures, now to be dispersed at Christie's. The last which Morgan saw was that depicting and describing his watches: he received it on Christmas Day, 1912, a few months before his death.

"*The most beautiful book I have ever seen!*" he cabled to Williamson. Morgan knew that this praise would be some recompense for the work of his devoted helper. Only a Croesus could have imagined, let alone produced, such exquisite work where, in the illustrations, the gold and silver was laid on so thickly that it could be engraved just as the originals had been! Now, alas, the sale-room—that Destroying Angel of collections—is to see the dispersal of another of these carefully garnered hoards of treasure. The miniatures are to be sold at auction, and an un-

sympathetic and unimaginative world may speculate as to whether they will fetch more than a small fraction of the price Morgan paid.

Pierpont Morgan's painful hesitation when he spoke to the doctor of the possible dispersal of his treasures after his death was more than a premonition. It was a pang of real fear. That this fear was shared by his own daughters is a matter of common knowledge, and now only these monumental books are left to bear witness to Morgan's love of the beautiful. Only a very few sets of the six completed works wholly printed on vellum are in existence to-day, and these are in the possession of one or two great museums, a crowned head or so and some members of the Morgan family. John Pierpont Morgan, the elder, gave one complete set to Dr. Williamson, who also possesses two further incomplete works, in themselves more unique and more important than all the others. When Morgan died, since there was no written contract, the executors decided that the work should be discontinued. That was a pity because, from a clause in his will which seems to me to indicate his wishes, I feel sure Morgan would have liked to complete this wonderful monument to his collections. Indeed, when at last he began to set his house in order, he was already a dying man. It is a significant sidelight on the character of the "merciless" man who has been called "chief of the trust bosses of America" that one book lay on the table beside his death-bed in Rome. It was "The most beautiful book I have ever seen!" Dr. Williamson's catalogue of his watches!

CHAPTER IX

HOW A V.C. EARNED A ROYAL SNUFF-BOX

IN the past my family has often found it rather dangerous to take part in art deals and other transactions connected with Royalty or with very important personages in the political world. Though these operations certainly afford some much more interesting sidelights on world affairs than official histories, very seldom indeed do they bring in a financial profit. Here is one story which commences, of all places, in that charming hotel at Bettws-y-coed which overlooks the Waterloo Bridge and the glorious Conway river. My uncle, the late Sir Joseph Joel Duveen, had caught a chill on a motoring trip in North Wales and as a result I was playing the role of male nurse during his convalescence. I had been reading to him Conan Doyle's masterpiece: *The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard*. Happening to stand at the window I saw an opulent car arrive, and from it clambered a figure in a large fur coat and, surprisingly, a fur cap!

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "There is Kopp!"

My uncle joined me at the window: there was no possible mistake. Kopp scanned the façade of the hotel with his usual Napoleonic glance and waved his hand nonchalantly to the driver of his noisy

Mercedes. He caught sight of us at the window and at that moment my uncle took me by the elbow.

"Look, Jack, I can't see anyone. D'you understand? I feel much too weak to see visitors; especially Swiss ones!"

He smiled at me as I left the room. An artist like Kopp, who had "sold" Trajan's Column to a wealthy American and was certainly one of the trickiest customers in the art trade, had not come to Bettws-y-coed for the scenery! Half-way down the stairs I met him mounting with a purposeful air, having swept aside the hotel staff in a regal manner.

"Ha, my boy!" he exclaimed. "I have just dropped in to see your uncle."

"I'm sorry; that is quite impossible. He is just recovering from a bad attack of bronchitis. But come along to my room."

Very unwillingly he accompanied me, and at last came to the point.

"Your uncle *must* see me," he said. "I've got something here that will make your whole blasted family jump!"

That was his pleasant way of being nasty, and of reminding me of his cleverness over the adventure of the Azure vases. Opening a small bag, he produced a green-and-gold *étui* (case) and when he opened this I did give a jump!

"My God!"

On a puckered white satin lining lay the most lovely example of the enameller's and goldsmith's art. It was a large snuff-box made of rose agate.

On the outside of the lid was an exquisite enamel-on-gold painting representing a Bacchanalia, the scene being in *grisaille*, that monochrome grey which the artists of the Louis XV period knew so well how to employ. On the borders of the lid was fruit and shellwork consisting of large diamonds underlaid with coloured foil to represent fruit and flowers. The setting and framing was of solid gold and the sides of the box had the same treatment in diamonds and gold. Indeed, from whichever side you looked at this gem of beauty, it had the appearance of rose-tinted snow studded with scintillating points of ice. Further, on the inside of the lid was a rather flattering portrait of Frederick the Great who was pictured as Jupiter riding on the clouds. I was standing staring at this lovely thing when Kopp pressed one of the small diamonds.

"Look what I found!"

A secret spring was released and when he turned the inside of the lid towards me, there was a masterly reproduction of "The Rape of Ganymede by the Eagle." I saw at once that Ganymede's face was a portrait.

"Now can I see your uncle?" said Kopp triumphantly.

"Yes," I sighed. "Of course. Come along in."

No sooner had Uncle Joel set eyes on the treasure than he started out of his chair. "Where did you get that?" Then, in Dutch: "*The Ridder's snuff-box!*"

"This belongs to a great Russian Princess," explained Kopp, "who has asked me to get an offer for

it. She wants money immediately; that is why I came to you."

"Don't waste time then," snapped my uncle. "You know that I never make offers. No, no"—he waved impatiently at the dealer—"don't talk about your 'word of honour.' You have already made up your mind exactly how much you want."

Kopp did not turn a hair at this slight to his honour.

"I'm not playing any game, Mr. Duveen. I really have to get an offer and take it personally to the Princess. She won't have anything put in writing."

For quite half an hour they wrangled. My uncle refused to make an offer and Kopp demanded one. Then the latter had an idea.

"Let Jack come over with me to Russia and he can make your offer in person."

Uncle saw in my eyes that I was willing. He hesitated a moment and then took an unexpected decision.

"I won't send my nephew. I know what Russians are like to deal with. I'll trust you this time, Kopp; but God help you if you play crooked with me. I'll give £10,000 for the box, but you must leave it here."

The Swiss resolutely refused to do this. We could move him neither by argument nor persuasion, so it was finally agreed that he should start for Russia the same night and send us a telegram as soon as he had obtained a decision from the Princess. Before he left, however, we spent an hour or two gloating

over this snuff-box which, apart from its intrinsic value, was truly a lovely thing.¹ As soon as Kopp had gone, I turned to my Uncle.

"Why did you offer him so much?"

"To make sure he won't sell it to anyone else," he replied. "Ten thousand is certainly £3,000 or £4,000 more than anyone else would give. And I'll tell you something else; I'm breaking one of my cardinal principles in buying the box for myself, because it has made family history. I'd never sell it to any client."

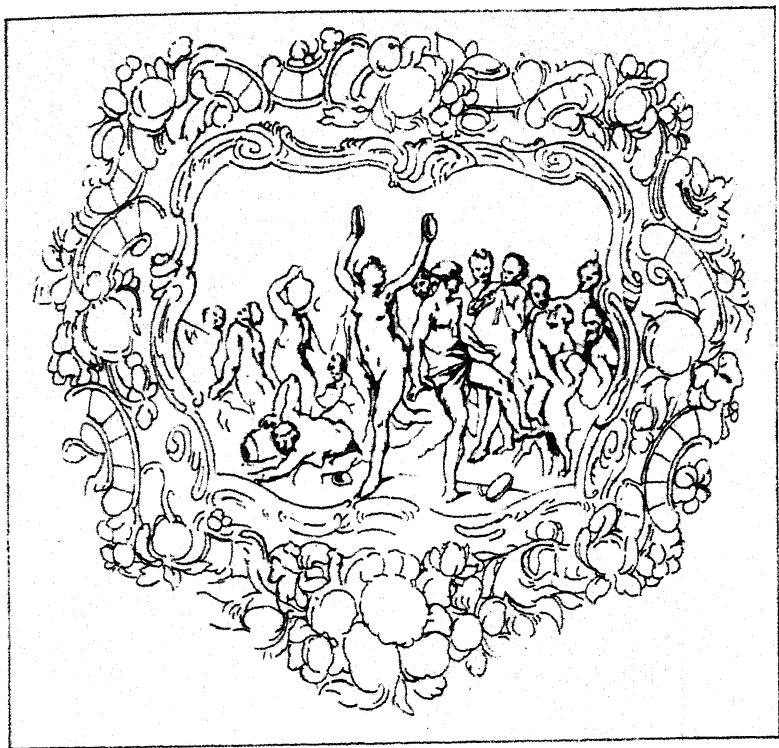
"Because it is so beautiful, or because it belonged to the Ridder?" I asked, sensing a story round the name of which I had heard so many romantic hints.

"Both," was the reply.

That evening he began a tale of van Esso, the Ridder (Ridder being a Dutch title roughly equivalent to Chevalier, or that of Knight, in England). It was a story of the siege of the Citadel of Antwerp in 1832 by the French, when Belgium was struggling for independence against William I, King of the Netherlands; and of how van Esso gained his title and this identical snuff-box, and nearly lost his life twice as a result.

"I got this authentic history from van Esso himself at Meppel in Holland," said Joel Duveen. "He used to tell and re-tell it to me as a boy, so that I remember every word.

¹ It was the last I saw of that incomparable jewel. The only thing which remains, as a very unsatisfying memory, is a coloured sketch made by the great London-born artist, Jean Guillaume George Kruger, for a jeweller. To my intense joy I discovered this many years later in the Berlin Print Cabinet.



THE SNUFF BOX OF FREDERICK THE GREAT

Drawing by Malcolm S. Ford after the original sketch of the London Huguenot artist,
Jean-Baptiste Kruger. (Enlarged to show detail)

[See Chapter IX



CHEVALIER JACOB VAN ESSO (THE RIDDER)
With the Dutch V.C. won for valour on the field

[See Chapter X]

“Ridder van Esso was also an art dealer, a little fellow with the spirit of a lion but as kind a father and husband as you could find. Though he was only five foot four, when a rough crowd of bullies belonging to the Knock-out Ring once tried to threaten him, he smashed the handle off a handcart and set about them to such purpose that he cleared the street in about two minutes!”

My uncle paused for a few moments and then said: “I will tell you the tale in the first person, just as the Ridder told it to me.”

“As you know, I was in the siege of the Citadel of Antwerp in '32 and one night during the march to the city the Dutch commissariat arrangements failed rather badly. Our half-company was quartered that night at a Flemish farm far too small for our strength, and presently the men ran short of food and began to steal things. A hulking great Flemish corporal of our section, whom we called Lillo, did nothing to restrain them, and pretty soon some of the lads made themselves a nuisance to the farm-girls. Soon after dark there were shrieks from the house and I ran in to find three men battering at a bedroom door behind which the girls had taken refuge. They had burst it down when I rushed in, picked up a chair and made at them: what with oaths and women screaming, the place was a bedlam. Suddenly this Corporal Lillo appeared, gave me a terrible kick in the side which floored me and then tried to stamp on my face as I lay half-stunned. I

don't like to think what might have happened if, at that moment, our young lieutenant had not arrived. Count van Limburg Stirum was a giant of a fellow and his fist took Lillo under the jaw with such force that the man spun right across the room. The Count helped me up and, as I wiped the blood from my face, he roared:

"If I ever find you using violence on the men again, Corporal, I'll half kill you before you are brought up for Court Martial!' Then to me: 'Well, little un, how are you feeling?'

"The result of the affair was that he appointed me his orderly and this was the beginning of a long and romantic friendship. Very quickly I grew to admire and love this happy-go-lucky, romantic fellow. Once in the Citadel there was little to do; the good people of Holland supplied us with plenty of food, and though the Belgians held the country between us and Holland, the River Scheldt was in our hands, ensuring us good communications. The townsfolk were against us but we did not worry about them: they dared not attack us. We were commanded by General Chassé, who had bombarded the town once, and after this the Belgians had left us in peace; but all the time international politicians were trying to make us surrender. In the end the French forces concentrated on us. No less than 90,000 men came against us and on 30th November, 1832, they began a bombardment with hundreds of guns and short-range mortars.

"Now, just before the siege began, a certain very lovely but notorious Royal lady, a Princess, had met

Count van Limburg Stirum during a short leave: being half-Irish and a devil of a fellow with the women, he was always falling in and out of love. So when this pretty woman, wrapped in a cloak, burst into floods of tears and he was comforting her, I tried to make myself scarce. Even so I could not help hearing what was said.

“‘Come away with me now, my darling,’ she was pleading. ‘We will travel south—to Italy and the sun, to love and happiness!’”

“The Count was kissing her and explaining the impossibility of deserting his post, and in the end she went away. Returning to his room, I saw him turning over in his hands a lovely rose agate snuff-box. Now I knew already a thing or two about antiques: it made me open my eyes very wide. The Count thrust it into his pocket, turned to me and snapped out an order. Then he laughed and stretched himself: ‘These passionate women are a nuisance, van Esso. It is all right for a time, but when they begin to commit follies——!’”

“The siege began soon after and under a hail of shells we found our bomb-proof shelters were merely death-traps, though we managed to serve our guns and defend the walls without too heavy casualties. The garrison numbered 6,000, but General Chassé had received strict orders that he was not to attempt anything which might develop his defence into a general war between Holland and France. We sat there and suffered casualties to ‘save our honour!’ Often the French gunfire set buildings within the

Citadel alight, so that we fought the fires under a continuous barrage. Then my lieutenant asked General Chassé's permission to countermine the indefensible wall of the Lunette St. Laurent, where the French engineers were driving a tunnel. His plan was vetoed, the General explaining that this would undoubtedly come under the heading of 'aggressive warfare!' Being shot to bits by the French was not fighting at all: it was sheer useless butchery. The Count was in a devil of a temper after this rebuff: he said that if he was not allowed to countermine, the French would blow the whole place about our ears. He was right, of course.

"Then came the 6th December, '32, a Santa Klaus day I shall never forget. The men had ironically hung up their stockings the evening before: so did I. When the Count saw it he laughed.

"What do *you* expect to get? All right: hang up one of mine as well and maybe Santa Klaus will drop the William's Cross into it! It is about the only way of getting one, in this shooting-gallery!' (The William's Cross is the equivalent of the Victoria Cross.)

"In the morning the French sent over a regular hail of shells and were concentrating on our great storehouse, which was presently blazing from end to end, in the afternoon. The flames were threatening our main arsenal and about a hundred men were hard at work fire-fighting, when I heard someone shouting: '*They have killed the Count!*' I ran out through clouds of smoke to see van Limburg Stirum

lying in the open. Bullets and shells were whistling round, and Corporal Lillo yelled to me: 'Keep back, you fool! You'll be blown to bits!' Paying no attention, I rushed out and found the Count moaning in agony in a pool of blood; his foot had been practically smashed to pulp. As I tried to lift him he regained consciousness, stared at me and muttered:

"'I'm too heavy for you. What are you blubbering for, you idiot? You'll only have one boot to polish in future!'

"I was crying with rage at being unable to drag him to safety, and in the end threw myself down on top of him to protect him from the French fire. He fainted then, and after a long time the big surgeon came and we got him back under cover. I was present when the surgeon amputated van Limburg's foot, but wasn't much use, because I fainted! Some days later he sent for me.

"'So; you sat on me, little rat!' he exclaimed. 'I've heard all about it and I've recommended you to the General for the Cross. Now go away and let me die in peace!'

"The Count very nearly did die, too: it was only his amazing vitality which pulled him through. At last the *Meester* (old Dutch: surgeon) took him off the danger-list, and again he sent for me.

"'I may die yet,' he said, 'and I don't want to take any chances. Here, van Esso, take that snuff-box out of my kit-bag. It's yours, and worth a lot of money. If you ever get out of this mess, take it to Paris or London and it will set you up in business.'

“‘But—but you know who gave it to you!’ I said, trembling

“‘Oh, the *Princess*! She has forgotten me long ago, for someone on the spot. Anyhow, I dare not return it for fear of compromising her. You’ll have to take it, van Esso. I don’t ever want to see the damned thing again!’

“He was getting so feverish and excited that I let him have his way, though years later he told me he was enraged because General Chassé had not given me the Cross on his recommendation. I examined the lovely agate box in detail and saw at once that it was worth a fortune.

“The siege of the Citadel lasted till the 22nd December: by then the whole defences were shot to pieces and the explosion of a French mine under the Lunette of St. Laurent was the final stroke. General Chassé surrendered, and we marched out under arms with colours flying: the whole of that hideous siege had been useless. The Count, with others wounded who could not easily be transported, stayed in Antwerp, and I was marched into France with the others. I must say that the French treated us prisoners very well. We were allowed to keep our belongings, but as a precaution I always carried the precious snuff-box on my person. Some time after our arrival in France, news came through that I had been created *Ridder*. The Count had kept his word.

“In June, ’33, I got back to Holland, but remained under arms till October, ’37. On the way home I called on Count van Limburg Stirum.

“‘Van Esso!’ he shouted at sight of me. ‘Excellent! Out of the Army at last? And what are you going to do now?’

“‘Antique-dealing, like my people before me.’

“‘Ah-ha? Plenty of capital, I hope?’

“‘Not so much. But I know a little about the business and shall get on pretty well.’

“‘Hum!’ said the Count thoughtfully. ‘What will you take for—*her* box?’

“‘I don’t want the box,’ I replied. ‘It has always been yours really, and I’ve only kept it for you.’

“‘None of that nonsense now,’ he bellowed. ‘I told you I didn’t want the dam’ thing!’

“‘Well, you got me the Cross, which is more than any snuff-box.’

“‘As a matter of fact I had kept my Cross in the box, and from time to time took it from its *étui* just to feast my eyes on the sheer beauty of the thing. I was lucky, indeed, to have two such wonderful mementoes of my adventures.

“‘Well, that is settled,’ said the Count firmly. ‘If you won’t let me buy it, you can sell it to advantage and set yourself up for a good start in your antique-dealing.’

“‘Neither he nor I realised then that this beautiful rose-tinted box with the romantic history was too great and dangerous a treasure for any man’s comfort. It is a good thing that we cannot look far ahead into the future, for it was to bring me into still stranger and more perilous adventures.’”

CHAPTER X

A LOVE-INTRIGUE THAT RUINED AN ART DEALER

“As the years passed, the snuff-box of Frederick the Great, of which I had become the unwilling owner during the siege of Antwerp, appeared to me as a mysterious talisman of happiness and prosperity,” said my Uncle Joel (continuing the first-person story of Ridder van Esso). “I was happy in my married life and, in spite of early difficulties, had done very much better than I had expected. During those difficult periods I was many times tempted to sell that rose-agate snuff-box, but always I managed to put off the evil day. And then, almost immediately, the difficulties disappeared. I imagined that it brought me good luck, and perhaps because of this, I was in terror lest I should lose it.

“Count van Limburg Stirum, to whom I had been orderly, was now married, and had become one of the trusted friends of the Dutch Royal Family, while the Princess—his one-time lover—had blazed a meteoric way through contemporary history. Her love-intrigues were scandalous and only too well known, though the Prince was even worse than she and by reason of that fact she was pitied. Then, nearly seventeen years after the siege, quite without warning, a bolt fell from a clear sky. I was sitting

on the *stoep* of my house smoking a quiet pipe when a smart post-chaise drew up with a clatter, and out jumped the Count. In spite of his wooden leg he was as active as ever, and came stumping towards me.

“‘Still got that box, van Esso?’ he shouted, while still twenty feet away. ‘You have? Ha, you’ve saved my life!’

“‘In that first moment of my foreboding he clapped my shoulder like the great bear he was: I felt it for a week! I knew that somehow here was trouble, as the Count dragged me inside and gave me the news.

“‘The Princess is in a terrible mess and I must save her,’ he said, prodding me with iron-hard fingers to make his points. ‘She has not behaved too nicely to me and my wife, but now she is demanding my help. So long as her brother was alive she was fairly safe, because the Prince was afraid of him, but now she hasn’t a real friend left. Everyone has turned on her, and her husband is bent on getting rid of her. Any stick will do to beat a dog, and though she is only paying him out in his own coin for his abominable behaviour, he is using her gift to me of the snuff-box as a pretext. There is a lot more behind—a very intricate story—but the Princess must get the box back. *At once!*’

“‘It seemed to me a funny business, but then I know nothing of high affairs. I went to my iron chest, took out the green-and-gold *étui* (case) and opened it.

“‘My God!’ exclaimed the Count. ‘I had forgotten how beautiful it was.’

“He took the rose-tinted agate box into his hands and admired the gold setting, the jewels set as fruits and flowers. Then I pressed the secret spring and he stared at the hidden portrait of ‘The Rape of Ganymede by the Eagle.’

“‘van Esso, this is worth a fortune. What will you——’ Then he stopped at sight of my expression. ‘No, I’m going to pay you 20,000 gulden (just over £1,700) for it!’

“He always got furious when he could not get what he wanted straight off. I explained that I would not dream of accepting money, since I was still indebted to him for my Cross and my title of *Ridder*. He stumped round the room on his wooden leg, cursing and swearing that he would break my ‘verdomde neck’ if I stuck to my point. At last he turned on me furiously.

“‘You Godverdommensche Jood! Do you think I am going to accept a present from you?’

“As he stood over me I thought he was going to hit me. Then I also became enraged, jumped up and thrust the box back into my iron chest, locking and sitting down upon it.

“‘You can never buy that box from me now! I’ll keep it to show my children how a Count shows his gratitude.’

“van Limburg Stirum stared at me and pulled his lip in silence. Then he shook his head and held out his hand.

“‘No, I’m a swine, van Esso. Shake! I shall be grateful if you can forget what I said.’

“‘With all his bearish violence he had the heart of a child. I could have hugged him.

“‘I knew what you meant, Count,’ I replied. ‘I make no gift of the box, neither do I sell it. It has always been yours.’

“‘Just as I was unlocking the iron chest again, another post-chaise stopped at the gate and a man ran up the *stoep*. He and the Count spoke together for a few moments and then van Limburg Stirum shouted in a voice of thunder: ‘Will they, by God? I’ll see them in hell first, Kings, Princes, or Devils!’

“‘He walked up and down for some minutes thinking deeply, and finally turned to me.

“‘Look here, van Esso, will you be my comrade again just for a couple of days?’

“‘After many years I felt the old, quick surge of excitement: the blood ran quickly in my veins. Without the least hesitation I leaped into this adventure.

“‘Can you still drive?’ he rapped out.

“‘A coach-and-six or a racing shay with the best cattle you can find!’

“‘John,’ said he, whipping round on the new-comer, ‘we’ll go to the hotel and I’ll slip away when it is dark. We will make a show of ordering everything for our departure to-morrow morning, but by that time I’ll be well over the frontier!’

“‘He brought his wooden leg down with a crack. ‘van Esso, can you get me a travelling-carriage, with

a pair of fast horses, without anyone getting wind of it?’

“‘The easiest thing in the world,’ I replied. ‘I have a friend who owns a cabriolet and a pair of black Guelder horses which can gallop a *caisson* for twenty miles.’

“‘Right,’ snapped the Count. ‘I’ll be back at ten. This gentleman here has news that a very great personage indeed has got hold of my letters to the Princess about that snuff-box, and they know I have come to you to get it. Now listen. Have the cabriolet ready and we’ll drive in turns till we get into Hanover where I have a good friend at Court. I’ll take the empty *étui* (case) with me, while you keep the box, because these people won’t interfere if they think I’m returning to the Hague with the box.’

“Everything was arranged and by eleven o’clock that night the Count and I were setting a rattling pace in the direction of the Bourtanger marshes, across which I knew a little-used but very fair track over the frontier. Suddenly, while I was driving, the Count shouted:

“‘Stop, van Esso! I can hear horses galloping behind us!’

“He must have been mistaken, for I could hear nothing save the blowing of our team. Later, I myself thought I caught the same sound and then van Limburg Stirum said it must be loose animals on the moor. Five miles further on I caught sight of a dark blur in the road ahead: it was an aged woman tottering along so that I had to stop to avoid her.

“‘Give me a seat, kind sirs,’ she wheezed, coughing asthmatically. ‘Tis a bad night for old bones.’

“Though we were in a hurry, the Count insisted on giving her a lift. I did not like the look of her at all. She sat squeezed against me on my left. Suddenly I got a waft of smoky breath; I became suspicious and moved my elbow a little, at every chance exploring her cloak. At last I felt something uncommonly hard. I knew instinctively that it was a pistol! Thoughts whirled in my head: this was some kind of a trap. Suddenly I leaned over the side and seemed to clutch at something.

“‘Curse it, I’ve dropped my whip. Hi, old lady, just hop out and get it, will you?’

“Out she got, whereupon I put the horses to a smart gallop and left her yelling in the darkness.

“‘What the devil?’ roared van Limburg Stirum.

“‘Pistol—a trap!’ I yelled, and at that moment two shots whistled over our heads from the rear.

“Galloping into the night, the lamps throwing a wide arc of pale light ahead, the horses checked of a sudden, reared and then fell in a struggling heap. Ropes had been stretched across the road. I was shot forward on top of the horses and when I scrambled to my feet two men were standing over the Count, who lay on the ground. Another fellow came at me from behind the horses’ heads. I ‘dived’ him and his skull got such a crack that he dropped his double-barrelled pistol. I picked it up and ran towards the group round van Limburg Stirum. One man, seeing the pistol, gave a shout and tumbled backwards,

and a shot sent his companion running down the road like a hare. The others followed him.

“‘You hurt?’ I gasped, pulling the Count to his feet.

“‘Of course not,’ he roared. ‘A little tumble like that!’ Then, as he went to the cabriolet: ‘God verdomme! Where is that case?’

“Alas, on starting we had returned the precious snuff-box to its case and now it was gone. It was never seen again. The Princess was divorced shortly after this episode: her name had become a byword, and I doubt whether the snuff-box had much to do with it. It certainly figured in the web of intrigues which was spun round her, and van Limburg Stirum told me afterwards, he believed the ambush laid for us was connected with people in the entourage of the Queen Dowager. He asserted that the snuff-box had been taken to Russia. I would rather have lost an arm or a leg than that marvellous piece of diamond-encrusted rose agate!”

As my uncle, Joel Duveen, finished the story in our hotel in Bettws-y-coed, he leaned forward and cut a cigar with care. “You see, old van Esso was right. The box *had* gone into Russia, and now this Kopp—this too-smart Swiss dealer—brings it back to us for sale. The more I think of it, the less I like it. Kopp is an incorrigible scamp; if only I’d sat down and written an open cheque for twelve or fifteen thousand pounds, I could have forced his hand and kept the snuff-box here. Now, goodness

knows what will happen to it. Damn it, I'm a fool, Jack!"

Uncle Joel was right because, like van Esso after the carriage episode on the Hanover road, we never set eyes on that lovely box again. It seemed fated to enter the lives of our family and then to slip away again, like mercury through clutching fingers.

The sequel to the story took place in Paris where one night, years afterwards, when on my way to a restaurant to dine, I caught sight of a bloated figure with a slouching gait. Somehow it struck a chord in my memory: I halted under a lamp-post and was amazed to find it was Kopp, the one-time rich dealer and patron of half a hundred pretty women. His trousers showed frills at the bottom and a dirty muffler took the place of a collar. Seeing me, he drew himself up with a semblance of his old pride.

"Oh, hullo, Jack! Didn't expect to see you here. I suppose—er—I suppose you couldn't do me a bit of good, for the sake of old times? I know of some fine tapestries but can't go after them in this rig."

It was pitiable and yet ludicrous. The "old times," when he had tried—and often succeeded—in cutting me and other dealers out with what he called "smart business" but which was much worse than swindling!

"Yes," I replied, "of course I can, Kopp. Here"—pushing some notes into his hand—"go and rig yourself out and come round to my place in the Rue Royale to-morrow."

He actually managed to do this business and the deal netted him a few hundred pounds' commission.

Later, I asked him out to dinner, because I was very curious.

"Kopp: tell me what happened after you left Uncle Joel and me at Bettws-y-coed that afternoon, with the snuff-box of Frederick the Great. What did your Russian Princess say to our offer of £10,000?"

Kopp looked away. He seemed genuinely affected and laid a hand on my arm.

"You've been damned good to me, Jack, and I don't want you to think I 'did' your uncle. You shall hear the whole story. Actually, I only got as far as Paris after I left you in North Wales. I meant just to stay the night *en route* to St. Petersburg—because—well, to see a very particular friend of mine."

He spoke haltingly at first, with long intervals I did not interrupt his train of thought.

"Ah, *mon ami*, there was a lovely girl! But she was a devil. Oh, far cleverer than I! I believe she was the natural daughter of a very famous heir-apparent: she certainly had something of his looks. Chestnut hair and eyes as blue as sunlit water flawed by the wind. She told me she had been unhappily married to an insanely jealous young man, and had left him for that reason. At this time she was also having an affair with an American millionaire who had furnished a flat luxuriously for her at a cost of about \$200,000. That night, Jack, I took her to the Café des Anglais to dine and I noticed she was wearing imitation jewellery in place of her own very valuable necklaces and rings."

Kopp drank up his glass of champagne, glanced

at the empty bottle and crooked his finger at a waiter.

"Yes," he said, as another Heidseck was brought from the ice-pail, "I was suspicious. Alberta saw my look of surprise and explained that she was frightened to death of burglars. Apparently there had been an epidemic of big robberies, and many women had lost their jewels. She did not like to go about flaunting such wealth. Well, we had a marvellous evening and lots of champagne. I made my usual mistake with a beautiful woman." Kopp nodded slowly as though at painful memories. "Yes, the greatest *gaffes* in my life were caused by my anxiety to show off my cleverness and wealth to a pretty girl! I told her all about the deal I had in hand, the snuff-box belonging to an Imperial Grand Duchess of Russia.

"Alberta was tremendously interested in anything to do with Royalty, and she begged me to let her have a glimpse of this marvellous *tabatière* (tobacco box). I offered to take her to my hotel, but she said she was tired: could I not bring it round to her flat? I agreed because *mon ami*, I saw a chance of pleasing her and also of staying the night at her flat! I was kept waiting for about ten minutes before Madame came into the *salon*, and was surprised to notice a strong smell of Havana cigars. Ha! thought I, her American friend must have paid an unexpected visit! This looks awkward for me. Then furtive steps passed along the passage-way towards the door, and I at once concluded that it could not be the American: perhaps it was some other lover anxious to keep out

of the limelight! At that moment Alberta returned. She was looking lovely in a diaphanous, silvery garment, and apologised for keeping me waiting.

“‘Just an old artist friend of mine,’ she explained. ‘In trouble about money, as usual. Come along to my boudoir and show me your treasure.’ When she opened the green-and-gold case, she went into ecstasies: ‘*Ah, quel bijou! C’est divin!*’ She fondled and kissed that box much more than she ever did me!’”

Kopp was by this time a little drunk. His eyes stared before him without expression and he shook his head slowly in condemnation of his own folly.

“Ah, more drink, mon Jacques—more kisses—a wonderful night! I think it was about three in the morning when we heard the devil of a row going on in the vestibule of the flat. Finally the door of the boudoir flew back with a crash and there was a villainous-looking fellow holding a revolver!

“‘*Grand Dieu!*’ shrieked Alberta. ‘*Mon mari!* Help me, my darling!’

“She threw her arms round my neck as the husband came into the room, waving his weapon. We were caught *en flagrant délit*: it was sufficient cause for any French husband to shoot at sight! Behind him I caught a glimpse of another man, so with this added evidence the law would have been perfectly satisfied. The fellow with the revolver foamed and stuttered with rage: his eyes were protruding and he looked to be about to have an apoplectic fit. When he could speak coherently, he shouted to his wife:

““Out of this, *sale vache*! I’ll settle this pig’s account without you!”

“She ran out screaming: it was the last I ever saw of her. The husband turned to me, his mouth drawn down in a sneer. He had complete control of the situation.

““Now, *mon beau* “Prince”!’ he said. ‘You know I am within my rights in shooting you like a mad dog? But I think it will be less troublesome and messy for you to pay in another way. What do you think your life is worth?’

“I stared at the second man, whereat the husband burst out laughing.

““No, he is not a commissaire de police: he is just a devoted friend of mine and a very obliging witness. My wife—the servants—no one can deny that you have spent the night here. Now then: which way are you going to pay?’

“I knew only too well what he meant. I had on me some £200: this I gave him and offered to sign a bill for a further 10,000 francs if he would give me a week in which to collect the money. He nodded, thrust the money in his pocket, and, while I was signing the bill, strolled round the room. Scrutinising my note, he tucked it away with a laugh.

““That is a cash transaction; no? What else have you got?’ His eye fell on the rose agate snuff-box which lay on a small table. ‘This is yours, *hein*? Ah-ha-a! A very pretty toy, too!’

“He examined it closely, weighed it in his hands and looked at the diamonds with the eye of an expert.

“‘Very fine, but a bit too showy. I mean, it is much too easily remembered—and recognised.’

“I knew then what he meant. A pain went through me like a knife-thrust.

“‘Don’t take that away—don’t destroy it,’ I pleaded with him. ‘I swear by all that’s holy, if you give it back I’ll pay you another 10,000 francs by to-night.’”

Kopp stopped for so long that I thought he had lost the thread of his tale. There were tears glistening in his eyes.

“*Hélas, mon ami*, that accursed thief did something which I shall never forget till I die. Deliberately, with fiendish malice, he threw that priceless snuff-box on the hearthstone and ground it to fragments under his heel. In that moment I leaped forward to try and rescue it, but he shoved the revolver menacingly under my nose. Afterwards he picked out the gold and jewels from the ruins and put them in his pocket.

“‘And now clear out before you get hurt!’ he said. ‘I don’t think your Russian Princess will believe you when you explain that you were robbed. Anyhow, I’m sure she won’t like her name being mentioned to the police.’ Then, as I passed through the door, he gave a parting shot. ‘No, and with your interesting past, *mon vieux*, I’m sure the police won’t believe you either!’

“I had, of course, fallen into a carefully prepared trap which, though as old as love itself, is always being ‘pulled’ with fresh success. The woman had

gathered too much useful information from my boasting. That, *mon* Jacques, was the end of Frederick the Great's snuff-box. It was also the beginning of my downfall, because the Princess tried to revenge herself on me. At last, in despair, while I was in Germany, I committed a great folly. They got me!"

Kopp's head sunk forward in his hands. There was another long and painful silence which I had not the courage to break. Then:

"Your cousin Joe was very good to me, Jacques. He sent me £800 when I came out of prison. But it was no use. I had lost heart. I have no longer any confidence in myself. I hope it won't be long now."

I knew what he meant by "it." This new and degrading life was too humiliating for a man who had once possessed wealth and power. Not very long afterwards poor Kopp died: I do not even know where he lies buried. So, alas, the peerless snuff-box of Frederick the Great and the misdeeds of the cosmopolitan adventurer, are inextricably mingled in sad memories.

CHAPTER XI

HOW A "TWENTY MILLION WIDOW" LOST ME £27,000

ONE of the most extraordinary women I have ever known was Arabella Huntington: extraordinary because of her indomitable mind and an outrageous spirit which compelled her to outvie all competitors. Long before I met her, Arabella was the unofficial wife of that financial giant, Collis P. Huntington, who might be described as America's greatest railway king. As time went on Collis P. married the woman who was to give art dealers on both sides of the "Herring Pond" some very alarming moments indeed. To go into almost astronomical figures, Collis P. left his wife close on 100,000,000 dollars: £20,000,000 in English currency, and—as one might judge—more than enough for any lone widow. Judging by the way she "threw her weight about" over art deals, she quite realised her financial importance!

Before I met her she had lost her house—"palace" is the proper word—in the San Francisco earthquake. At least, after the 'quake there was a fire and the American Courts rather kindly decided that the house was destroyed by fire and *not* by the 'quake: otherwise she would not have reaped an enormous claim from the Insurance Company concerned. When I saw her, she was full of the subject.

"Those people," she fumed, "tried to get out of paying what they owed. All my priceless treasures were utterly destroyed—they were just irreplaceable, Mr. Duveen!"

I nearly laughed. Knowing only too well that most of her 'irreplaceable treasures' had originated in the faking *ateliers* of Paris, London and elsewhere, I thought she had not done too badly over the business! All the same, an art dealer doesn't laugh at a client who can write a cheque for £100,000 and scarcely miss the money. But she was clever, that woman. She was surrounded by a clique of dealers—a most high-minded crowd!—who had sold 'priceless' antiques to her and to Collis P. Huntington, but I feel convinced that owing to their internecine wars, she knew the real worthlessness of her treasures. In 1906 she was passing through Europe in that semi-regal state only possible to American millionairesses, and in Paris stayed at the Hotel Bristol. This famous hotel, now no more, was then a humble but exclusive inn at which all the Crowned Heads of Europe used to stay when they visited Paris incognito. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, quite a few American millionaires began to reserve suites and sometimes whole floors, so that very soon they crowded out the Royal and imperial personages who had made it their temporary home; but what they paid is not known. Mrs. Huntington was one of these proud guests of the humble hotel, and her name was only too well known to Parisian, British and German dealer-touts, as well as to the needy scions of noble

houses who "dabbled" in art—usually to their financial advantage.

Perhaps the most notorious of such touts was a little, corpulent, dark-eyed man owning the resounding title of Count Baltazzi. This sinister figure, hailing from Hungary, was no less than uncle to the ill-fated Comtesse de Vetcera who had committed suicide with the Archduke Rudolph, the only son and heir to the Emperor Francis-Joseph II of Austria. Baltazzi had left his native country for various urgent reasons, and found it more dignified—and possibly more lucrative—to allow people to suspect that he had killed the two lovers. Indeed, that was the only capital he had left after dissipating vast riches before he went into exile. Baltazzi was a shrewd student of human nature: what he did not know about women could have been written on a postage stamp, and very quickly he established a hold on Arabella Huntington. Within a few months he became her social god-father to the best society within his reach. This meant, of course, that he could present "Her Majesty, the Dollar Empress" to a carefully chosen circle of great but penniless names. At the time, that meant a matter of a few pounds here and there paid into greedily outstretched palms, but, whatever Baltazzi received as Gentleman-in-Waiting to Arabella, he certainly obtained some sizeable amounts from the swarm of intelligent and generous art-dealers who scented the possibility of loot. Baltazzi was, in fact, courted by every dealer and tout in Europe.

Just at this time Duveen Brothers had built their palatial Paris branch in the Place Vendôme, and Baltazzi had his eye on big money. To whom could he go with a big deal better than to the Duveens? Here, he could pour out Arabella's golden cascade with the certainty that she would receive value for money. Here, too, he could be confident of the honesty of the sellers and—most important!—of their generosity. My late Uncle Joel, the first Sir Joseph Joel Duveen, had just bought the Rudolph Kann Collection for £1,000,000 and it was probably the news of this *coup* which brought Baltazzi and the widow to the new premises. Mrs. Arabella Huntington walked round the "salong," a lorgnette lifted languidly to her eyes, to examine various priceless *objets d'art*.

"What have you here fine enough for me?" she demanded, haughtily.

The Count caught my cousin's eye, and the latter began in his inimitable way to tell the history of several valuable pieces. He talked to such good purpose that when Arabella left she had given orders amounting to about £300,000! Baltazzi thus earned a commission which much exceeded the traditional ten-per-cent and a gratitude which lasted for years until the Count, by his insatiable "borrowing," "killed the goose which laid the golden eggs." Such a transaction may appear a little unmoral to those who do not know the art-dealing world, but the shrewd Arabella was "wise" to all that.

"Of course, Mr. Duveen," she told me later with

an admirable air of nonchalance, "I know the Count gets a fine commission on everything I buy. But he is worth every penny of it!" Then, when I did not appear unduly impressed, she added: "You see, he is such an *interesting* person. A man who can kill his Emperor's son to avenge the honour of his niece, has character!"

The pace Baltazzi set himself was too hot to last, and very soon he outran Arabella's indulgence, likewise that of Duveen Brothers. Then, in the hope of making more commissions, he came to my galleries in Paris soon after my marriage. For half an hour he related an involved story of his wrongs—not necessarily the truth, of course, and then said:

"Look, my dear fellow: one of my best friends is arriving on Saturday from New York. He has got money to burn and I'll see that he comes to you before anyone else."

That sounded very nice until he added: "Oh, and you might just lend me £500 on account of the commission!" He got just about as many francs and I saw little of him till he rushed in on the day before War was declared and tried to 'touch' me for some thousands of francs. His alarm was pitiable, so I gave him enough to see him across the frontier. That was the last time I met this proud but innocent "murderer!"

My first meeting with Mrs. Huntington had resulted in a £24,000 deal which was suddenly upset by a vile and Machiavellian trick by a certain "expert"; but two years afterwards she came into my Paris galleries to make a confession.

"I felt so badly about that," she told me with superb impertinence. "I found out afterwards that the expert had quite misled me. You were right all the time, and I wish I had let the deal go through."

I just managed to refrain from replying that two years previously I had explained the trick in detail, but that she had laughed at me. I was fool enough to think, however, that her attitude now denoted a change of heart, and when she asked whether I had anything specially fine for her I saw prospects of a good sale.

"Yes," I said. "I have just bought a very lovely Louis XVI cabinet: one of the finest I've ever seen. It is still in Epping Forest in the house of a peer, but here is a photograph of it."

After scanning it closely through her lorgnettes, she said: "How much do you want?"

"Twenty-seven thousand pounds."

"Well, if it is as good as it looks, I'll buy. When can I see it?"

"Just let me put a call through to London and you shall have the answer in a few minutes," I replied.

Everything was arranged satisfactorily, and I told Mrs. Huntington that if she was really in a hurry I would go over to England at once and bring back the cabinet on the night-boat.

"Splendid!" she exclaimed. "Telephone the Bristol as soon as you get back and I'll come round at once to look at the piece."

By good staff-work the cabinet was awaiting her inspection in Paris the next night, but there was no Arabella. A week passed, ten days, a fortnight, and then enquiry at the "Bristol" elicited the fact that she had just gone off on a honeymoon with Henry Huntington, her nephew-in-law, who was even richer than she. As the lady was about seventy at the time and the bridegroom was not less than sixty, the whole affair was somewhat amazing. Months went by and I was beginning to get desperate when one morning a woman spoke to me on the telephone.

"I am speaking for Mrs. Huntington," she said, "who has asked me to say that she would like you to keep the Louis XVI cabinet for her to see."

"When will she be arriving?" I asked.

"It is difficult to say: in fact she won't be here again before next year. She is going straight to New York from the Mediterranean."

This gave me a pretty problem. Was I to keep the £27,000 cabinet on the off-chance of a sale "next year"? Or, on the other hand, could I afford to antagonise so rich and influential a client by ignoring her? I promised that she should have the first refusal, and presently left for a holiday at Deal. There I met Bob Partridge, the great dealer. He was almost in a state of panic.

"Haven't you heard?" he exclaimed. "America is going to put heavy duties on works of art again on 1st October. I'm taking all my finest things over next week, and if you're wise, you'll do the same."

I always believe in quick decisions, and so Bob and



THE LOUIS XVI WRITING CABINET

Made for Marie Antoinette and reserved by Mrs. Arabella Huntington for £27,000

[See Chapter XI



NAPOLÉON II (KING OF ROME)

With the eldest son of Archduchess Sophia (the later Emperor Francis Joseph of Austria) and the future Duchess d'Aumale. At this period Napoleon II was supposed to have had his love affair with the Archduchess Sophia

[See Chapter XII

I sailed in the *Lusitania* with a precious cargo which included my precious cabinet. I calculated that a fortnight in New York would suffice for my business: after all, Mrs. Huntington could hardly be anything but flattered to think I had gone to such trouble in her interests. Alas: I did not know to what lengths the pride and obstinacy of that incredibly wealthy woman could go, nor did I realise that my brief fourteen days' stay would be lengthened to eight-and-a-half months!

During the trip I was nearly 'rooked' of £2,500 by cardsharps—a story I have already told—and on arrival, Bob Partridge, in his usual lordly manner, booked the State Apartments at the Plaza at a cost of \$500 a week. After weeks of delay, Mrs. Huntington telephoned me.

"Yes, I had your letter, Mr. Duveen. I'm not so well after our big tour, but I'll come and see your cabinet soon."

She gave me her private telephone number, and that was all I heard of her for the next few weeks. At last, rather by a miracle, I managed to speak to her again, and once more she pleaded worry and many business affairs. Meanwhile months were going by and I was no nearer my objective of inducing this proud woman to purchase a cabinet which she had already ear-marked for herself. The Customs tariff-scare subsided, and I sent over to Paris and London for many beautiful objects which were sold: that enabled me to keep my patience with this incredible woman. At last, about mid-December, strolling into

the lounge of the Plaza, I walked right into my would-be client's arms!

"Will you bring me that photograph, Mr. Partridge?" she exclaimed, as I involuntarily stopped in front of her.

"Old Bob" Partridge was over six foot: I am more than half a foot less: she must indeed have been shortsighted!

"You are mistaken," I replied. "I'm Jack Duveen."

"Oh well, I've just been upstairs to Partridge's rooms: that's how I made the mistake."

Then she peered at me through her lorgnettes and realised that many, many months earlier she had asked me to reserve the Louis XVI cabinet for her.

"I'm so sorry about that," she went on with a would-be casual air, "but do tell me about Mr. Partridge's Up-Park collection. What do you think it is worth?"

I was not to be caught like that. Though she put me through a regular catechism, I was non-committal. I explained that, through Lord Tankerville, I knew a little of the history of the collection and that a host of lovely things had been lost over a game of cards. To do Bob a good turn, I told her the history of the Madame du Barry commode. Her eyes sparkled with pleasure at the blood-thirsty details, and she became very thoughtful. Then:

"I don't want the Sèvres porcelain: will he sell the other things without it?"

"I doubt it very much. I offered him a high price

for the commode and he refused. It will have to be a sale *en bloc*. I couldn't even estimate the value of the collection without going carefully over each piece."

She swept out of the lounge like an empress, leaving me to pay for the tea she had ordered. Incidentally, she had not asked me to join her! That evening I met Bob Partridge.

"You're in luck!" I exclaimed. "Mrs. Huntington is going to buy your commode."

I went on to give him details, whereat he flew into a fury.

"You've ruined all chance of a sale," he roared. "You've spoiled my market!"

Knowing Mrs. Huntington, I just laughed. My judgment of human nature was proved when, a day or two later, "Old Bob" came up in a shame-faced manner.

"Sorry I swore at you the other night, old chap," he admitted generously. "But my temper has been all to bits lately: no business and all these expenses! She bought the collection at a hell of a price."

"And the Sèvres porcelain, too?"

"No," said Bob, avoiding my eye. "Fact is, she said she wouldn't give the darned stuff house-room!"

"Well, you are the mug, then," I replied. "Mrs. H. was so keen to get that commode that, if you had stood out, she would have taken the lot. And at your own price, too!"

Oddly, months later I paid Old Bob some £16,000 for that porcelain: some very lovely pieces. But he

never told me how much he got for the collection. These things cannot be hidden for long inside trade circles, and I have every reason to believe that the lady wrote a cheque containing at least six figures. Bob Partridge booked a berth on the next boat and made tracks for the Italian Riviera: he was wise!

I, alas, was still left with my Marie-Antoinette cabinet, and the prospect of seeing £27,000 just outside my reach, was distinctly galling. In the end I came to loathe the sight of the telephone through which Mrs. Huntington was always putting me off, and at last I wrote explaining that I had brought the piece to New York specially for her and might I have an immediate decision one way or the other. This was because, with dismay, I found that the steam-heating of the hotel was beginning to warp my little masterpiece of French cabinet-making. I was feeling desperate, when suddenly she rang me up.

"What do you mean by asserting you brought this furniture over specially for me?" she cried. "That is an impertinence! I won't look at it at all, now!"

As soon as she lost her breath, I stemmed the spate of words.

"Come, Mrs. Huntington: you asked me to bring it from London to Paris and your secretary asked for the first refusal. Negotiations have now been going on for over eight months. Do I understand that you were *not* so anxious to see it——?"

"Oh, you and your explanations!" she screamed into the mouthpiece. "Keep your excuses for——" she hesitated; then: "——your *cook*!"

This amazing allusion to an occupation which the wagging tongues of New York ascribed to her own early career, left me gasping.

"I don't quite see, Mrs. Huntington, what a perfectly honest profession has to do with ill manners!" I replied.

There was a few moments' silence, broken only by stertorous breathing. At last I heard an icily cold voice:

"What do you dare to insinuate?"

"I will insinuate," I said, "and even state categorically, that Mrs. Huntington allows herself manners which even the Empress of Germany cannot afford!"

With this I rang off: that was in 1914, just before the cataclysm which sent the Kaiser and his Consort into exile. The Louis XVI cabinet was never sold to this haughty and ill-mannered millionairess, and I had spent more than eight months in New York at very great cost, just so that she could prove her manners. It was one of those cases in which the art-dealer has to confess himself beaten and to take his medicine. My ultimate experience with this ill-fated piece of furniture was even worse; but that is another story.

CHAPTER XII

THE SECRET OF NAPOLEON II'S CASKET

ONE of those tantalising mysteries, the solution of which might well have changed the course of European history, concerns the time when I was just growing up with visions of becoming one of the greatest art-dealers in the world. Owing to insatiable curiosity and a lust for that knowledge which, in the art world, means power, I was in the habit of examining in detail every item of my parents' very varied stock of *objets d'art* in their Hague shop. In fact, after a little, I knew the period, make and worth of every piece, which took on a personality of its own.

One of the most showy of these pieces was a small jasper casket engraved with classical medallions of heads and the attributes of war. The corners and edgings were golden mouldings in the style of the First Empire, which, even to my youthful eye, looked rather out of keeping with the bold engravings on the jasper *plaques*. I did not know then, as I was to learn later, that this engraving on the jasper was early Roman work of the time of Augustus, 27 B.C. —A.D. 14, but that the goldsmith's moulding used to make the *plaques* into a casket, was the work of Thomire, the famous French artist in metal of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Thomire's spineless neo-classicism made very poor showing against the bold and strong art of the early Roman Empire! Further, at the four corners of the casket, snakes' heads had been fashioned out of baroque pearls and enamelled gold: the whole thing was very showy—its only (and damning) characteristic as a work of art.

"How did we get hold of this?" I asked my mother one day, when she found me examining it with interest.

She smiled, for she took infinite pains to train me in artistic ideas of the right type.

"Your grandfather, Jacob-Hangjas, bought it many years ago from Joseph Volant, the Brussels art dealer. Then, after your father married me, he acquired it for 400 guilder (£35), but had no better luck in selling it. After your father died it remained in stock, and later, when I married Joseph Duveen, we had great trouble in keeping things going. You were too young to remember, but after the Baring crisis people had little money to spare for beautiful things. Presently, we relegated this jasper casket to the 'unsaleable' class. Indeed, it has an unlucky history, because each time we thought we had found a purchaser, the deal was called off at the last moment."

"How was that?" I asked.

"Look at the last time," she replied. "That Prince Demidoff who was staying at the Hotel des Indes at the Hague: he was just on the point of giving a very good price indeed. Then, in the nick of time, we discovered this famous 'Prince-Collector' to be an impostor! The police came in by the front

door while he slipped out by the back." My mother smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "We should never have seen his money if he had laid hands on the casket! And now probably we shall never sell it at all. It is unlucky."

Now it happened that every Sunday I was allowed to potter round the showrooms, and was in the habit of spending a quiet afternoon each week with the treasures I was getting to know so well. One Sunday I was busy with Henri Havard's book on Delft pottery and was examining the marks on every bit of Delft I could find, when, of a sudden, I heard a slight sound behind me. Turning, I saw my young brother, Joel, in the act of lifting the golden-and-jasper casket from a tall stand.

"Here—what are you doing?" I exclaimed in alarm.

His startled face was turned to mine. In that instant, helplessly, I watched the casket slip from his fingers and crash to the floor. As a nine-year-old, he was strictly forbidden to touch anything in the showrooms, but before I could even begin to tell him what was in store for him he ran, screaming, from the room. I picked up the casket and found that one of the jasper side panels was broken in two: it was a terrible tragedy which meant real trouble for young Joel. Moreover, I was to blame for allowing him to come into the salon at all. Just then an idea occurred to me. It might just be possible to repair this panel: at anyrate, the damage would not be so obvious. I ran upstairs, procured some new patent English glue and put the bottle to warm in hot water. The

fracture itself was fairly clean and the mending was not going to be a very difficult affair. Then, examining the metal framing into which I had to refit the fragments, I saw something which sent a thrill of excitement down my spine.

It was a piece of thin green paper, very little paler than the jasper itself, folded very flat and tucked away inside the oblong panel! Here was treasure-trove indeed! With trembling fingers I opened it to find a page of tiny, cramped writing in French. The ink was so faded that for some minutes I could not decipher the script, the translation of which ran:

“MY BELOVED SON,

I, your unhappy Father, am leaving this world when you have only just entered it. That demon in human form, Metternich, the enemy of my Father, saw to it that I should not live long. My follies have helped him. I fear he knows the secret of your birth, as he knows everything. It is to warn you against him that I write this, in the hope it may reach you at a time when you can think and act for yourself. Your mother will tell you nothing: she thinks it shame to have borne a child who is grandchild to and true heir of the great Napoleon. Remember: you are heir to the greatest man who ever lived, and some day you will have to fulfil your destiny. One day France will want the direct heir of her greatest son to rule over her, and when that day comes you must claim your illustrious descent. You are imperially born on both sides.

“I am sending this little jewel-case to your Mother with a last request to keep it for you till you reach manhood, and then to give it to you. I fear she will not tell you it is a gift from me, since she is too afraid of compromising herself. But I have told two of my greatest friends to inform you when you reach twenty that this box was mine, and that it may bring you great power. I dared not tell them more. I trust that this message will awaken your curiosity sufficiently for you to take the box to pieces and discover this letter.

"My poor brain is tired. I can only pray that some good angel will see to it that justice is done you. I cannot.

"Your dying Father,

"NAPOLEON II."

My first thought was: "*What a sell!*" A bit of faded writing: nothing about a hidden treasure. Remember that I was still only a youngster, with my mind running on adventure. To begin with, I did not want to draw my parents' attention to the broken casket and, in addition, I did not think the bit of paper worth anything. Quickly I slipped the letter back into the frame, glued the fragments of the broken panel carefully together. Then, I had another surprise: *the letter showed through the jasper!*

In my hurry I had replaced the letter with the white side against the *plaque*. I knew, of course, that real jasper is opaque, so I realised that this could not be jasper. However, I undid the panel, turned the letter so that the green part came against the side and glued the pieces together again. Mr. Alberge, the great Dutch art dealer, had given me a learned book on precious and semi-precious stones, so it did not take me many minutes to explain the mystery. The stone was not jasper, but the jaspis of the Ancients; which is slightly translucent!

I decided that I would tell my mother about the accident at some future and more propitious moment; but the incident lingered in my mind and later a study of my *Histoire Universelle* gave me a possible clue to that striking phrase: "*You are imperially born on both sides.*" I read something about the ill-fated

Emperor Maximilian of Mexico who had been shot by his own subjects in 1867. Born on 6th July, 1832, he was officially the second son of Archduke Charles and the Archduchess Sophie of Austria, and his elder brother was Francis Joseph, who became Emperor of Austria in 1848. Now Napoleon II (who was presumably "your dying Father") died on 22nd July, 1832—just sixteen days after that boy had been born! Therefore, I argued, the unfortunate Maximilian of Mexico was indeed the son of Napoleon II, who was also known as the King of Rome and Duke of Reichstadt.

Months went by and one day I came in to find my parents just finishing lunch in company with no less a person than our old family friend, Joseph Volant. The sight of him reminded me of that secret letter.

"Pardon, Monsieur," I exclaimed in a lull in the conversation, "but do you remember that jasper-and-gold casket which you sold to my grandfather many years ago? It had pearl snake-heads at each corner."

There was a moment's silence as Volant and my parents stared at each other; then he burst into a laugh.

"Do I remember it? Why, after a lot of trouble I've succeeded in tracing it and have just bought it back! Or rather, I have exchanged it, with your father, for a small collection of old Nankin china."

"I've always been interested in that casket," I replied eagerly. "Do tell me something of its history!"

"Don't pay any attention to the lad, Volant," said my step-father, frowning at me. "He is becoming a nuisance."

But old Volant, good fellow that he was, smiled tolerantly.

"If you want to know," he said, "I bought it years ago in Vienna from an old manservant of Prince Metternich, and after some time sold it to your grandfather in Haarlem."

Here, indeed, was a revelation! What had the letter said? "*That demon Metternich . . . saw to it I should not live long.*"

Volant went into great detail of how he had tried to sell the casket, but I was only listening with half an ear. Someone must be in the secret, to have wanted this box so much and so suddenly. I leaned forward eagerly.

"M. Volant—could you—would you tell me the name of your client? It must be someone *very* important."

"Here, here!" growled my step-father, as I caught my mother's warning glance.

I shrank back, realising I had made a *gaffe*. Such a question infringed all rules of etiquette between art dealers. M. Volant shrugged his shoulders good-humouredly.

"The *gamin* is right, though," he said; then lowered his voice. "It *was* someone important: so much so that I don't even know his name. He was brought to me by one of the gentlemen from the Austrian Legation and he paid cash-down. The whole affair was quite sudden and rather mysterious."

Later, when I looked over the very beautiful and valuable things which Volant had given my step-

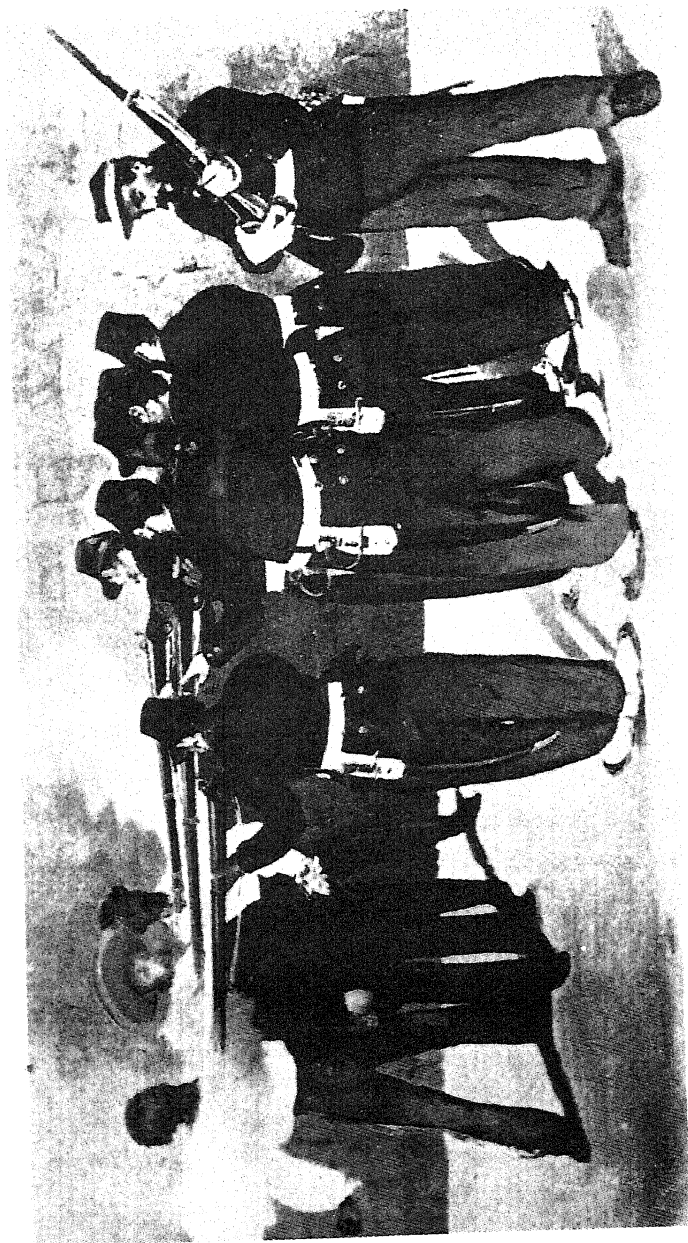
father in exchange for the jaspis casket, I knew that the Unknown must have paid a very stiff price for his purchase.

So greatly intrigued was I by this fragment of secret political history that I pieced together the story of Maximilian and his beautiful, but tragic wife, Charlotte, daughter of Leopold I of Belgium. It was known, of course, that the Duke of Reichstadt (under which title the Hapsburgs tried to bury the identity of Napoleon II), felt something more than friendship for the Archduchess Sophie. This was proved by the discovery of a secret stairway which led directly from the young Duke's rooms into those of the Archduchess, and their friendship was at its strongest—and was being most talked about—some nine months prior to Maximilian's birth. There can be no doubt that Prince Metternich, who missed nothing, knew all about the alleged liaison, and its probable result.

It so happened that Maximilian's elder brother, Francis Joseph II, succeeded to the Austrian throne in 1848 while Maximilian was on a voyage, and he returned to find a distinctly hostile atmosphere at Court. No doubt Metternich had disclosed all he knew to his new master. The brothers, who had been great friends, became estranged. Maximilian consoled himself by hard work in reorganising the Imperial Navy and its base, Trieste, and after his marriage to Charlotte in 1857 he was appointed Governor-General of Lombardy. Here, however, he became too popular, so that he was dismissed and went to

live with his clever wife in their beautiful villa at Miramar, on the Adriatic. They were practically in exile. Even Miramar was too close for Francis Joseph II, because after the Great War (when the secret Imperial Austrian archives were examined), it was found that Francis Joseph had actually been approached by the Mexican refugees in Paris (through the son of Metternich) about the possibilities of Maximilian's acceptance of the Mexican throne. Francis Joseph's Foreign Minister "officially" refused, *but suggested the acceptable conditions!* This happened some time before Napoleon III knew anything about the plan, and proved clearly contrary to official history, that it was *not* Napoleon III who conceived this fatal scheme, but Maximilian's elder brother who despicably planned the departure of the younger, on this, the most tragic adventure of the nineteenth century.

The long story of how, after Maximilian and his wife jumped at the chance of escaping from so hostile an atmosphere, Francis Joseph succeeded in making his young brother renounce all claims to the Hapsburg Empire, is a matter of history. But no sooner had the young couple entered the capital of their Mexican "Empire" in June, 1864, than they found it stretched only so far as French bayonets could defend it. The end of the American Civil War meant Maximilian's downfall, since the United States demanded the withdrawal of the French army. While Charlotte, his brave wife, went to Europe to try and save her husband, and even begged the Pope's



EXECUTION OF MAXIMILIAN OF AUSTRIA (EMPEROR OF MEXICO) AT QUERETARO
(After the famous painting by Edouard Manet)



THE "FREEMASONS" GROUP OF DRESDEN PORCELAIN
(By courtesy of the Dresden Museum)

[See Chapter XIII]

protection, Maximilian faced the rising storm in Mexico. Charlotte's disappointments so worked on her mind that she lost her reason during a dramatic interview with Pope Pius IX, while Maximilian, warned by all and sundry, decided to abdicate and leave for Vera Cruz en route to Europe. On the way to the port, the Jesuit, Father Fischer, prevailed cunningly upon him to stay, and even Maximilian's own mother joined in the efforts of Church and State to prevent the doomed man's return. They won: Emperor Maximilian stayed to put himself at the head of a comic-opera Army and, after a few months, he was betrayed to President Juarez' troops at Queretaro. So the Emperor was executed by the bullets of his own people on 19th June, 1867: a tragic ending to "the beloved son" of Napoleon II.

History is full of "if onlys" and "might have beens," but there is surely no story more cynical than that of Francis Joseph II, who, certain that his ill-fated brother had perished by insurgents' bullets, at once sent a warship to bombard Vera Cruz unless the body of Maximilian was handed over! The Austrian Admiral did recover the shockingly mutilated corpse, because gunfire was the only language President Juarez, the Indian, understood. But how very much easier to send the gunboat before the execution, rather than after! As a final irony, Francis Joseph had made the theatrical gesture of reinstating Maximilian as heir to the Hapsburgs (after his own son) and just before the tragedy was consummated. He did this, so it was given out, to prevent

Juarez killing Maximilian. The gunboat was sent *after* the execution. Cynicism could scarcely go further.

Maximilian's fate and that pitiful letter signed "Napoleon II" impressed me very deeply, so that in after years I often pondered what would have happened had that letter come into the right hands at the right time. Years passed. I journeyed to England and embarked upon various ventures, and one day I happened to go into Charles Volant's shop in Brussels. We talked about his father and our many connections and, casting an eye over his stock, I experienced a sudden shock. There was the very jaspis casket which old M. Volant had exchanged with my step-father! My heart beat fast: I could scarcely restrain my excitement. The snakes' heads ornaments had disappeared, but I would have known it anywhere in an instant. Casually I approached the subject.

"Look, Charles—what have you got there? I know that casket!"

"Of course," he replied, taking down the velvet-lined case. "I remember the time my father exchanged it, with yours, for some Chinese porcelain. I only bought it a few days ago; quite cheaply, too. A man from Vienna offered it to me, and at a fraction of the price my father sold it for. I couldn't resist the bargain."

I stood turning it over in my hands. There was the faint line of the crack I had mended ten years ago! How it took me back to young Joel's escapade and the ensuing discovery!

"How much will you take for it?" I asked.

"From you?" said Charles, pursing his lips. "Well, I think I paid enough for it—2,000 francs. I'll take a ten-per-cent profit."

Eighty pounds for the secret I had once thrown away as worthless! Then I remembered that his family and ours had been friends for generations.

"No, Charles," I replied, setting the box on a table in front of us. "I'll pay what it cost you, and give you half-profits when I sell it. That is, if a certain thing remains where it was!"

He was mystified until I explained, then grew excited, examining the cracked panel carefully. Going into an inner room, he fetched tools and very soon we had prized out the two pieces which had hidden Napoleon II's secret for so long.

"Now——!" he breathed, as we turned the casket to the light.

Alas: there was no little green letter. I heaved a sigh of regret. There was just one tiny morsel of paper sticking to the back of the panel where I had used glue to mend the cracked jaspis: that was all. The casket had given up its dangerous secret, and Napoleon II's letter to his "beloved son—imperially born" had no doubt been filched by the urgent gentleman from the Austrian Legation who had paid so high a price to old Volant ten years previously. The box had then probably been given away to some confidential servant of the Hapsburg household, and so at last it returned to me who had first solved its secret. Had Maximilian indeed found that letter, the course of European history might have been vastly different.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DRESDEN PORCELAIN CASE

SINCE time immemorial the art-dealing business has been a happy hunting-ground for people seeking "commissions," legal and otherwise. Indeed, going back to the fifteen-hundreds, you find the immortal Titian not only as acknowledged "expert" on old works of art, but a very assiduous collector of *douceurs* for his opinions, and other activities of this kind. I doubt if the business is any worse than it was four hundred years ago, but it is difficult to judge because these so-discreet transactions are very rarely committed to paper. Too often their history has died with their principals: it is in some ways the greatest pity, for the most sensational and interesting art *causes célèbres* of our time are doomed to be forgotten for that very reason. Had the world gained a glimpse of the *true* inside story of some of those cases, they would have lived for ever in history!

One of those episodes, in which the published and fairly lurid details were as nothing compared to the real facts, concerned the famous Dickins v. Ellis trial, perhaps better known as "the Dresden Porcelain case." Curiously enough, one of the chief actors in this melodrama, Arthur T. Ellis, was a young art dealer who was easily the least guilty of

the band of sharks who surrounded the kindly old Mr. Dickins, founder of Dickins & Jones, of Regent Street. Over a course of years this old and invalid gentleman had interested himself in art, and eventually became something of a fanatical collector of the very costly "Dresden porcelain," made in the princely works of Meissen during the reign of the luxury-loving Prince-Elector of Saxony, August the Strong. Now Mr. Dickins was exceedingly rich and hence was a greatly coveted client of the London art dealers of thirty years ago: in fact, they fought by every underhand means to monopolise his favours. After many intrigues, a choice little clique managed to get hold of the twenty-year-old Arthur Ellis, whom they used as a tool to win the old man's confidence and his entire patronage. You may find it difficult to believe, but it is a fact that some of these "sharks" actually called on old Mr. Dickins in the guise of doctors, museum experts and artist-painters, in the hope of influencing him. One resourceful dealer even obtained an audience, dressed up as an Italian organ-grinder!

The big man behind Ellis was a Bond Street dealer whom I will call Donnart: he was having the time of his life in obtaining from a certain noble collector his less desirable pieces and then selling them at top-notch prices through Ellis to Mr. Dickins! Everyone in the trade who was "in" with Ellis and Donnart was making money: in fact the art business was experiencing a minor boom! Arthur Ellis was young, extremely distinguished in manner and had exactly

the kind of personal charm to impress a kindly old soul like Dickins. Here is an example of how the "racket" was worked. One day Donnart telephoned Ellis, asking him to come round instantly to his galleries.

"There!" exclaimed the big dealer, rubbing his hands and pointing to a pair of fine "Sèvres vases" (made during the second half of the nineteenth century at the Minton works!) "They're the goods, my boy! Just the very thing for our client, Mr. Dickins!"

Ellis chewed his lip reflectively. He was very far from being an expert, and had to rely on Donnart's word.

"What did you pay for them?" he asked.

"Don't you worry. Question is—what's *he* going to pay for them?" was the reply.

In the end Donnart sold those vases to Mr. Dickins for £8,000, after the innocent Ellis had boldly assured his patron that they were genuine in every respect! Actually, I believe Donnart had acquired them for something like £200. These facts were never even mentioned in the Court case which came later on.

Just about this time it was discovered by those interested, that old Mr. Dickins was really spending more money on his hobby than was either prudent or desirable. They remonstrated with him and with Arthur Ellis and then, as this had no effect, a doctor was prevailed upon to give orders that Mr. Dickins must not see Ellis or any other art dealer. This was a sad blow for Donnart and Co., but "the trade"

set their wits to work, with some rather surprising results. One day an elderly gentleman called at Mr. Dickins' house with the request that he might be allowed to examine the collection. By slow degrees this art-loving author—as he claimed to be—became great friends with the old man, and even went so far as to offer to prepare an illustrated catalogue of his Dresden treasures. This author also gave out that he was a keen collector, and had picked up some very fine pieces during his travels: he explained to Mr. Dickins that these were at his house in the South of France, and that though he did not care to risk their being packed up and sent over to London, he would ask friends of his who went to France to bring back a few items with them. Mr. Dickins, greatly interested, was subsequently shown various quite important pieces of Dresden, all of which seemed infinitely superior to his own.

“I suppose, my dear fellow,” he said to the author one day, “you wouldn't care to—well, to exchange a few of these for some of my own? Of course, you understand that I shall be only too happy to pay the difference in value.”

This was just what the other had been angling for! Many exchanges were made, and in each case one of Mr. Dickins' best pieces was replaced by a worthless imitation, and a fat cheque found its way into the “author's” bank-balance. This went on for quite a long time, until the little goldmine was exhausted by the death of Mr. Dickins. The bomb burst when the executors decided to sell the Dresden porcelain

collection at Christie's! Big London dealers who went to examine it cracked jokes over what were, in the main, ridiculous fakes; and it was not long before the executors themselves realised what had happened. They at once took steps which led to the undoing of Ellis and, to a less extent, of the much more important Donnart.

I remember that sale at Christie's very well indeed, because a large number of the more "valuable" fakes were bought in by people who obviously knew nothing about and could not be interested in art! They, of course, were tools of Ellis and Donnart. Ellis himself bought very many pieces, some of which were genuine: I do not believe he was expert enough to know the difference, and quite often he undoubtedly had passed on porcelain at high prices, which he did think to be genuine. In any case, I do know he borrowed money right and left for his purchases, because he already had an inkling that the executors of Mr. Dickins were beginning to make trouble. They did, in fact, take legal action, and Donnart quietly "settled" for various items which he personally had sold to the old man, whilst at the same time he repudiated all liability for his deals through Ellis. It was a kind of *sauve qui peut*, in which poor Ellis was an "also-ran." He had lived up to the hilt of his earnings and now had no margin to play with. Then Ellis, with whom I had not been on the best terms for some time, came to me in a pitiable state. The Dickins executors claimed many thousands of pounds from him.

"Well," I said, after he had explained the position, "if it is true that you and Donnart were in joint account and your deals are shown in your books, you will have to disclose the fact to the plaintiffs. You've been all kinds of a fool, but if you want to save your skin you'll have to pay over whatever the executors demand. D'you realise that your books will show something very like criminal conspiracy? Donnart must help you: he must have been crazy to settle with the executors without at the same time seeing that your case was cleared."

"He won't help me, Duveen," replied Ellis. "He won't even see me now! The last time he told me to get out of the country, or go to hell in any way I chose."

At that moment Bob Partridge, one of the most famous dealers of that time, was shown in.

"The very man to help you!" I exclaimed, forgetting for the moment that Partridge had been ousted from the Dickins affair by Donnart and Ellis.

Partridge's glance flickered over Ellis. He grunted and sat down. Then he raised a protesting hand.

"Don't tell me: I know all about it," he exclaimed "You're having a rough time, young feller-me-lad! Your pal Donnart is showing you his 'good nature,' eh?"

"Ellis is in a much worse mess than you realise," I cut in. "You'll be sorry enough when you know all the facts."

"For God's sake, don't let him tell me all the facts!" roared Bob. I did not realise till long afterwards,

how very right he was! Then his generous nature showed itself. "All right, I'll do what I can to help."

He agreed to go along, interview Donnart and try to make him see reason. In his usual impetuous way, he rushed out of the door, but within half-an-hour returned, raging.

"That —, white-livered skunk!" he shouted, striding up and down my office. "I told him he was an idiot to let Ellis lose this case. I told him a lot of things. He let me go on quite a while, pretending to read his paper, and then, d'you know what he said?" Partridge thrust his face forward, purple with fury. "He said: 'You're a very good man to hounds, Bob Partridge, and if I ever take to hunting, I'll ask your advice. When it comes to my own business, I don't want interference from you or anyone else, and if Ellis is in trouble he needn't expect me to get him out!'"

Partridge leaned against my writing-table and mopped his face.

"I tell you, I felt like ramming his paper down his damned throat! After pleading with him—me, pleading, mark you!—all the dirty skunk said was: 'Have you got anything else to say, as I've got a lot of work to do!'"

It was complete failure but, knowing what I did of Donnart and his mentality, it was only to be expected. Having pocketed £80,000 through using Ellis as a catspaw, he wasn't going to disgorge a large amount for the man who had squandered his money and who now faced disgrace and ruin.

When the case came on, before the late Justice Grantham, Sir Edward Carson and Rufus Isaacs (the late Marquess of Reading) led for the plaintiffs, while Ellis had only been able to find the money for two juniors, one of whom was Mr. Harry (later Judge) Dobb. There was quite a galaxy of art "experts," one of whom was the late Frederick Litchfield, ex-antique dealer and the author of various works, while the Continental experts were headed by the late Professor Brinckmann, of Hamburg.

I sat in Court, listening to the evidence and to Mr. Litchfield, who analysed pitilessly piece after piece of porcelain which was passed to him. Probably I was the only person present who realised that in several cases what he denounced as fake was perfectly genuine and valuable porcelain. But his pontifical air was sufficiently imposing, especially when you realise that many of these "fakes" had been bought in by the plaintiffs themselves after the auction, for lack of buyers. It was Gilbert-and-Sullivan comedy, though not one person in Court realised it! The unhappy Ellis, practically penniless, had been unable to bring any expert witnesses to refute all this high-brow testimony, but the climax came when Mr. Litchfield began to hold forth on a group of Dresden porcelain representing August the Strong and Peter the Great, dressed as Freemasons, dividing the Globe. This group had been sold by Ellis for £440 to old Mr. Dickins and was one of the features of the case.

"This," intoned Litchfield, fixing the Judge with

a penetrating eye, "is indeed peculiar. I must explain that every piece of porcelain from the ovens at Meissen which showed the tiniest flaw was at once rejected and became the property of the workpeople. Thus in all some thousands of pieces, most of them very slightly flawed indeed, were thrown out before any colour was applied to them. These were sold to outside buyers who either had them decorated in cheap German factories or even sold them just as they were."

There was not a murmur in the Court: everyone strained to catch the great expert's words.

"Most of these white pieces have been acquired by unscrupulous dealers during the last thirty years," continued Litchfield, "and they have had them decorated so as to increase their outward value a hundred-fold. The very interesting point about this group, however, is that it has been decorated *by an English artist!*" He paused to enjoy the sensation he had made, and then went on: "The proof that it was decorated by an Englishman lies in the fact that the names of the Continents on the Globe are written in English, whereas the decorator at Meissen or elsewhere would, of course, have written in German!"

There was a subdued murmur of admiration, which Litchfield acknowledged as his due; but I did not know whether to laugh or swear! I was sitting next to Mr. Julius White, solicitor for Ellis, who happened to be my own solicitor, too.

"By Jove, Litchfield put his foot into it then!" I murmured to him.

"How—what has he done?" whispered White excitedly. "For Heaven's sake, tell me—we must catch at any straw!"

"No, I don't want to be mixed up in the case," I replied. "If you'll promise not to call me as a witness—well, try and get hold of some of those Dresden pieces, and with them the Globe group. Don't be too eager. As you examine them I can tell in a moment whether I'm right."

Ten minutes later White got hold of the pieces and as he turned the Freemasons' group over in his hands, a glance at the Globe showed me I had been correct. I scribbled a few words on a sheet of paper and passed it to White, who gave it to his leading counsel, Mr. Harry Dobb. The tedious examination of Litchfield went on its weary way: successive experts agreed with him; but Professor Brinckmann, from Hamburg, was questioned in great detail. Then, to my joy, Mr. Dobb began a cross-examination.

"That Freemasons' group you hold in your hands, Professor—do you agree with Mr. Litchfield that here is a piece of old Dresden porcelain which has been redecorated within recent years?"

"Most certainly," replied the German.

"You agree that the redecoration was done by an English artist, because the writing on that Globe is in English?"

"Undoubtedly!"

"Now then, Professor," continued Dobb suavely, "just examine that Globe very minutely, please. Is it not a fact that the writing—the names of the

Continents on the Globe, ought to be in Latin, not in German?"

The old gentleman, visibly taken aback, hesitated.

"Er—yes. That is so—I forgot!"

"Now will you kindly examine the group again while I ask you a few more questions."

The Professor, with little beads of perspiration on his forehead, began to look acutely unhappy.

"You are aware," said Dobb, "that with the exception of Europe, the names of all the Continents are spelled just the same in English and Latin?"

"Yes."

"Now just turn that Globe a little, will you? Please tell the Court exactly how 'Europe' is written."

There was a horrid silence while the old German peered through his glasses at the group in his hands; a silence which quickly became painful. At last he quavered:

"Ach—I make a meestake!"

Not only he, but Litchfield and all the other important "experts" had made the same "meestake." At a glance I had seen that the Continent was spelled "Europa."

Brinckmann's admission and the resultant debacle demoralised even Sir Edward Carson and the brilliant Rufus Isaacs, but it did not help poor Ellis much. Justice Grantham had evidently made up his mind as to the rights and wrongs of the case: maybe he forgot the witty epigram attributed to Judge Hawkins, who said: "There are three degrees of liars—liars, damned liars, and expert witnesses!" Ellis, who

had not appeared in Court after the first day, lost the case, and a judgment of nearly £20,000 was given against him. I heard that he had fled to Norway, while Donnart made himself scarce and removed his business, lock, stock and barrel, to Paris. Later he became a naturalised Frenchman, and received the red ribbon of the Legion d'Honneur!

The day after the trial I got the shock of my life, for only then did I have a real opportunity to examine the Freemasons' Dresden group in detail. Not only were all the experts completely wrong in saying that it had been redecorated by an English artist, but were wrong altogether about the decoration itself! The group had really been decorated immediately after it had been made: the only trouble was that *it had been made during the last few years!* I tremble to think what I should have gone through had I been subpœnaed. That "£440 group" was worth, at most, 440 pence!

CHAPTER XIV

THE ART DEALER WHO ESCAPED PENAL SERVITUDE

WHEN Arthur T. Ellis lost his £20,000 "Dresden porcelain case" he vanished from London in a night, and the whole of the art-dealing trade was wondering what the executors of the late Mr. Dickins of Regent Street were going to do about it. Rumour had it that the executors had obtained a warrant for his arrest, but just at this moment Ellis' young and very charming wife came to see me.

"The children and I are practically penniless," she told me. "Even my own furniture and the money Arthur settled on me before we were married have been taken, and my Trustee, who used to be Arthur's greatest friend, won't do a thing to help me."

Sobbingly, she explained that she and her young children had been evicted from their home: it was indeed a case of *Vae Victis!* Naturally I gave what assistance I could, but some months later the girl told me that her husband had written from Rotterdam begging for help: it seemed he was almost starving. Rather relieved that Ellis could remain so close to England without police attention, I gave her about £15, but two days later came the news that he *had* been arrested. Apparently Mrs. Ellis

had telegraphed the money quite openly and Scotland Yard acted at once. Then, through some flaw in the proceedings, it was found that Ellis could not be extradited from Holland; but he solved the problem by volunteering to return to London and face any criminal proceedings which might be taken. That, of course, was what he ought to have done in the first instance. He was brought before the magistrate at Bow Street, was granted bail, and there now began one of the strangest tragi-comedies in the history of our business.

The Prosecution found themselves in a quandary, because in the civil action they had already discovered that "expert" art witnesses are not always too reliable. Litchfield and Professor Brinckmann, of Hamburg, both great men, had been proved very fallible indeed, and so now they brought an entirely fresh batch of "experts" to prove their case.

Mr. Bodkin found his new "expert" witnesses entangling him in a mass of evasions. The principal expert was a man of undoubted importance and great reputation, but how he did wriggle when asked to give his opinion on porcelain which had not already been examined and judged by others! There was a truly terrible moment for the Prosecution when he was asked to give his opinion on two vases produced in Court by the defence.

"Do you say that these are genuine?" he was asked by defending counsel.

"Certainly not!" was the reply.

"Ah!" purred counsel. "Are you aware that

those vases have recently been bought in open auction at Christie's for a large sum, by a very great Continental connoisseur, against English specialists in Dresden porcelain? Do you know that they came from the Massey-Mainwaring collection?"

The unhappy expert subsided like a pricked balloon, while the Prosecution tried to assert that this was all quite irrelevant. Nevertheless, it was clear that the defence had the right to test the capacity of this "expert," and the result was that the gentleman was discredited. Indeed, it was the last time that he appeared in an expert capacity before any tribunal! His faltering explanations on other pieces which he vaguely, and somewhat foolishly, described as "being the sort of things most dealers would declare 'right'," only involved him more deeply than ever. It was then that Mr. Bodkin realised it would be hopeless to try and get a verdict from any jury on the question of "fakes."

Other questions were gone into and, after many appearances at Bow Street, Ellis was finally committed for trial on two separate indictments. The first of these concerned alleged frauds in cases where Ellis had stated on invoices that he sold various articles at a commission of ten per cent. when in fact he had made enormous profits; the second indictment was in respect of fraud by selling to Mr. Dickins spurious articles as genuine. Arthur Ellis had lived in a princely style whilst the going was good, but he was already penniless before the end of the civil case, over which he owed Mr. Dickins' executors



THE COUNTESS COSEL, DRESDEN "CRINOLINE" FIGURE
A question about this figure made history in Criminal Law

[See Chapter XIV]



A SET OF FIVE CHINESE PORCELAIN "FAMILLE ROSE" VASES

Decorated in colours with battle and garden scenes. Yung-Cheng reign, 1722-1736. Bought by the author in Naples, 1908. Sold to Edwin J. Berwind, Esq., now valued at £10,000

(By courtesy of Edwin J. Berwind)

[See Chapter XX

some £20,000. One charitable art-dealer made an unofficial collection amongst the trade and managed to accumulate a defence fund of some £600. He argued that no matter what Ellis had done, he was entitled to a proper defence. When I saw that subscription list, it struck me that precious few of Ellis' former friends had contributed anything; most of the funds were provided by his past opponents and enemies!

Julius White was once again solicitor for the defence. He and Reginald, his barrister son, gave their services for nothing, while leading counsel accepted a very modest fee. The Judge was the awe-inspiring Recorder, Sir Forest Fulton, of Adolf Beck fame, and the redoubtable Mr. (later Sir) Archibald Bodkin led for the prosecution. As I sat in the Central Criminal Court it seemed to me that the learned Judge decided quite early in the proceedings, that Ellis was guilty. When, as constantly happened, Bodkin went rather too far in his cross-examination and defending counsel leaped to his feet to protest, the objection was over-ruled. But after a little I began to see that there was method in his apparent weakness. Counsel for the defence accepted the Recorder's rebuffs with a resigned air, and it quickly became apparent that Ellis had no possible explanation against the first indictment. He was alleged to have made vast and fraudulent profits at the expense of Mr. Dickins, and there were his books to prove the facts. Ellis explained that "knock-out" and "joint-account" profits had had to be paid to dealers,

in cases where pieces had been bought privately or at auctions; but the excuse was too flimsy. I saw through the pretence at once; so did the jury.

Then—a dramatic moment in which Mr. Bodkin made history in the jurisprudence of the Criminal Courts—he asked Ellis a particular question relating to one of the spurious pieces he was alleged to have sold Mr. Dickins. This was an item from the second indictment. Instantly leading counsel for the defence was on his feet to protest that this question was inadmissible, but Sir Forest Fulton overruled him with a wave of the hand. This ruling was to have effects far beyond Ellis' trial.

On the last day of the trial, whilst sitting in my usual seat in Court at the opposite end to the witness-box, I became aware of an immaculately-clad gentleman in morning dress who was edging his way towards me. He sat down and presently made some casual comment on the case, to which I replied indifferently: I was much too interested in the evidence to want to talk to strangers. He was, however, inclined to be persistent, and of a sudden it occurred to me that there was some special reason for his friendliness; he had something important to communicate. At once I was on my guard. In the art-dealing trade you very quickly learn to be suspicious of unexpected friendliness and intrusion. At last, after about half-an-hour, he turned to me.

"You are Mr. Jack Duveen, aren't you?"

"Yes," I assented. "I don't remember having met you before."

"Oh, I've often seen you at Christie's."

Ha! thought I. Here's a fellow who wants an opinion on something 'on the cheap'! I was to be proved wrong.

"I'm glad to find you are friendly towards poor Ellis, too," he went on. "After all, he was only a catspaw."

"I know all about that," I said. "And a good deal more, too. He was only twenty when this affair started. It is the big man behind him who ought to be in the dock!"

At that a startled look came into his eyes: then he smiled quickly and I felt in my bones that here was a friend of Mr. Donnart, the dealer of Bond Street. He wanted something from me, but if he thought I was going to help Donnart, he was greatly mistaken! His next words gave me an opening.

"If you know the inside facts of this case, you will realise that the wrongs are not all on one side. Ellis has only himself to thank for being without friends and money. By blackmailing his friends, he alienated them and lost their help."

"I'm sorry to disagree," I retorted. "For an absolute fact, I know Ellis has been despicably deserted and left in the lurch by the one man who is responsible for his predicament."

The stranger straightened himself, but before he could reply, I added:

"That man was Donnart. You are a friend of his and want to discuss something with me!"

That hit him hard. For a moment he was completely nonplussed. Then he decided to make the best of it.

"You talk straight, Mr. Duveen. Yes, I have got a message for you. Shall we go out and talk somewhere quietly?"

"It is too late to help Ellis now," I told him, over coffee in a nearby café. "And let me tell you that Ellis was never a blackmailer. In fact he has taken his medicine like a man and has made no attempt to implicate Donnart, as he very easily might have done. Ellis was pretty hysterical at the beginning of the case, and Donnart probably mistook for threats, any wild words he may have said in appealing for help."

The stranger leaned forward over the table.

"No," he said slowly. "You want to help Ellis, Mr. Duveen, and so do I and Donnart. After you've heard what I have to say—and offer—I think you'll agree to my proposal."

"Well?"

"I want a little diary which was kept by Ellis. It contains information vital to Donnart."

"*And dangerous!*"

"Agreed. Its contents are certainly incriminating; but Ellis swore to Donnart that he destroyed it some time ago. Donnart does not believe him; as soon as Donnart gets possession of it, he will look after Mrs. Ellis and the children in a generous manner and Ellis himself shall be given a good start when—as soon as he can work again!"

"No," I replied emphatically. "I'm not going to be mixed up in this affair."

"As you wish. But will you just do one thing: ask Ellis whether he still has the diary? If he has, I will find means of arranging the matter without your help. If he has really destroyed it, Donnart has promised to look after his family in any case."

"Very well," I replied, after consideration. "But tell me, I don't even know your name—but why did Donnart pick on a stranger as intermediary and why did he choose me to approach Ellis?"

"He chose me because he can trust me and I don't live in Europe. He picked on you because he hates the only other man who could approach Ellis."

"Bob Partridge?" I snapped.

The stranger nodded.

"All right," I said. "I'll get you your information one way or the other, on condition that you give me your word to provide for Mrs. Ellis and the children."

The trial ended shortly after, with a verdict of "Guilty" on the first indictment; but defending counsel had astutely provided himself with a very good case for the Court of Criminal Appeal: a Court set up subsequent to a cruel sentence of ten years' penal servitude passed on the innocent Adolf Beck by the very Judge who presided at the Ellis trial. Mr. Bodkin applied for the further hearing of the second indictment to be postponed to the next Sessions, and the Recorder announced that he would postpone sentence till after the second case had been

heard. Ellis, of course, was kept in prison, but I had a chance to speak a few words to him at the end of the first case, before he was taken down to the cells. After commiserating with him, I whispered:

"What have you done with that little diary Donnart knows about?"

"I burned it the very day he asked me to: I promised him I would."

"Your wife's happiness and future may hang on this, Ellis," I told him. "Is that really true?"

"I swear by all I hold sacred, it is the truth," he replied earnestly.

I saw that he was greatly moved, and was content. Later I got into touch with the mysterious stranger and gave him the facts.

"That is all settled then, Mr. Duveen. Donnart will be greatly relieved, and I must thank you very sincerely for the trouble you have taken."

"I can rely on you keeping your word?" I asked.

"Without fail. Everything shall be done as promised; the future of Mrs. Ellis and her family is assured."

We parted, but I had not done with the affair. Three days later the stranger was shown into my office in Bond Street, and instantly I knew something was very wrong indeed.

"Mr. Duveen, I feel terribly ashamed of myself," he began. "I was greatly tempted to leave Europe without seeing you, but I couldn't——"

"Donnart breaks his word?" I snapped.

"Yes. He says he cannot trust Ellis' word that he has destroyed that diary."

"And *you* come and tell me this? That means that you, too, have lost faith in Donnart: you feel you've been made use of in a very dirty game!"

"I'm afraid you are right," he murmured.

Then I lost my temper completely.

"What right had you to give your word, if you were not sure you could carry it out? You and that hound Donnart are going to let the family starve, because I've been such a fool as to prove that he is safe against criminal proceedings! Now he has got what he wants we can all go to the devil! Well, get out of my sight—I never want to see or hear from you again. I won't be made a fool of twice!"

The man turned away and left my office without another word. A long time has passed since then and I now know I did this stranger an injustice in treating him in such cavalier fashion. If he should read these lines, I hope he will understand that I am sorry: his fault was not so great as I felt at that moment.

While Ellis was in Brixton prison, a "dog-fight" began in the Courts which lasted for months. By this time the defence-fund was quite exhausted and in the end Bob Partridge came to me and said that, though Ellis had put one or two "swift ones" over on him from time to time, he would like to help the poor devil now.

"So he did to me. But what are you prepared to do?" I asked.

"Exactly the same as you!" was the retort.

"Done, Bob!"

That was how he and I decided to provide funds for the final fight conducted by Julius White and his son. Young Reginald White fought with amazing tenacity, so that even Mr. Bodkin himself was baffled at times. First of all a Bench of three Appeal Judges heard the case, and White contended that criminal law disallows any evidence relating to any other case being put before a jury while the defendant is standing trial. He proved from records that Sir Forest Fulton, the Recorder, had allowed prosecuting counsel during the hearing of the first case, to ask questions relating to the second case, and the defence's objections were overruled. Three Appeal Judges eventually referred the matter to a second and eventually a third Bench of five Judges! Mr. Bodkin experienced a very trying time indeed, since he had not only to contend with Reginald White but also the Appeal Judges, who put some very pertinent and awkward questions to him. In fact, Julius White told me afterwards that this was the only occasion on which he had seen Archibald Bodkin get really "rattled!"

In the end the appeal was successful and the verdict of the Old Bailey jury was quashed. To my mind there is little doubt that Sir Forest Fulton allowed himself to be swayed by his personal convictions; but as to whether it was a miscarriage of justice or not, it is difficult to decide. At any rate Arthur Ellis became a free man again on a technical

point of legal procedure. It would certainly have been deplorable if the catspaw in the whole affair had been made to pay a heavy penalty, while the real transgressor remained in the background and escaped scot-free!

The postponed second indictment, concerning the sale of spurious antiques to Mr. Dickins, was not proceeded with, for the very good reason that presumably strong evidence had already been torpedoed by the ridiculous testimony of the prosecution's "expert" witnesses. Poor Ellis paid a very heavy price for his follies, for not only was he ruined financially, but also morally and in the commercial sense. He never recovered, because the world did in fact adjudge him guilty according to the evidence produced in Court. One thing is sure: if he had indeed kept that little diary and produced it in Court, one big London art-dealer would not have become a naturalised Frenchman before, at least, serving a stiff sentence in a British prison for his misdeeds!

CHAPTER XV

WHEN "CONNOISSEURS" GO WRONG

IN the buying of works of art of any description the purchaser, be he connoisseur, amateur, or dealer, learns a very great deal about the frailties of human nature. Indeed, one of my greatest annoyances has always been the frequent manner in which people change their mind about the prices they have asked for a piece of porcelain, a picture, or antique furniture. This is usually due to a mixture of ignorance and sheer greed. Time and again I have lost things after having quoted for and supposedly bought them at a very fair price, and such incidents left a bitter taste in my mouth, because too often my loss came through giving advice or approximate values out of a kindly feeling and a spirit of friendship.

A peculiarly unhappy case of this sort happened during my first year in Liverpool, when I was asked by a client to visit a small exhibition in aid of charity, at the school in West Derby. I was shown round by a fussy little gentleman named Radford, who insisted on telling me all about the various pieces. Now and then he went "all abroad," and very soon I had to do the "telling"; which resulted in our becoming quite friendly. I did not see much of

him in the next few months, but one morning he came in, bearing a brown-paper parcel.

"I want you to have a look at this," he said, opening it with care. "What do you think it's worth?"

It was a rather fine Louis XV fan, worth about £75. I told him the value and added that there was precious little demand in Liverpool for old fans of that type.

"Will you keep it for me and try and sell it to some Continental dealer who may come over?" he pleaded.

I agreed. Just by luck, a Dutch dealer did come over a few weeks later: he told me he was making a small collection of French and Spanish fans for a client.

"Here is the very thing!" I exclaimed, glad to be able to do a stroke of business for Mr. Radford. "You can have it for £80."

After some argument the Dutchman said he would take it at that price, and at once I wrote to Radford. I was really pleased at having got an additional £5 for him. Next day he came into the shop, looking quite hot and bothered.

"I had no idea you would sell the fan without consulting me!" he puffed. "You see, it really belongs to my mother and I cannot dispose of it without her consent."

This looked queer to me. Radford was certainly on the wrong side of sixty, so surely he could make up his mind one way or another without recourse to "Mother!"

"Oh well," I replied, rather piqued. "You asked me to sell it and I got a better price. However, if you really want it back I will ask my client to relinquish it."

After a great show of gratitude from Radford, I prevailed upon my Dutch friend to return the fan, though he shook his head and gave me sage advice.

"This is a trick, my friend," he said. "Watch that client of yours. I do not trust him."

Having got his fan back, Radford assured me he would ask his mother's permission to sell and that within a day or two I should know one way or the other. Within twenty-four hours I was rung up by Mr. Kidson, the well-known Liverpool art dealer.

"I say, Duveen, I want to ask you a confidential question. I have a fellow here who has a Louis XV fan: he says you offered him £80 for it. Is that right?"

"What do you want to know exactly?" I parried.

"Well, I don't often buy French stuff, but what would you give me for it? This man wants £100."

The cat was well and truly out-of-the-bag.

"I won't buy at any price!" I shouted.

When my Dutch friend heard the details, he chuckled.

"Don't worry. That man will come back to you again."

"I'll show him where he gets off!"

"Don't be silly: this is a matter of business. If you like, put all the blame on me."

That very afternoon who should turn up but the grey-haired and gushing Mr. Radford. I'd have

given a lot to take the smile off his face with a good "piece of my mind!"

"Mr. Duveen," he exclaimed, "I've done my best for you with my mother, and she is willing to accept £100 for the fan."

"I'm sorry," I replied, "but the friend who was to have bought it has already left for the Continent. I'll write to him, if you like."

Of course, I never wrote at all: I was too sore over the whole shabby business. When he next came in I explained that the Dutchman had completed his collection and did not want the fan after all. Later I heard from Kidson, the dealer, that Radford had asked him to take the fan to London where, at a sale, it fetched just £50. I'm afraid I was so uncharitable as to be pleased that the would-be biter had been bitten!

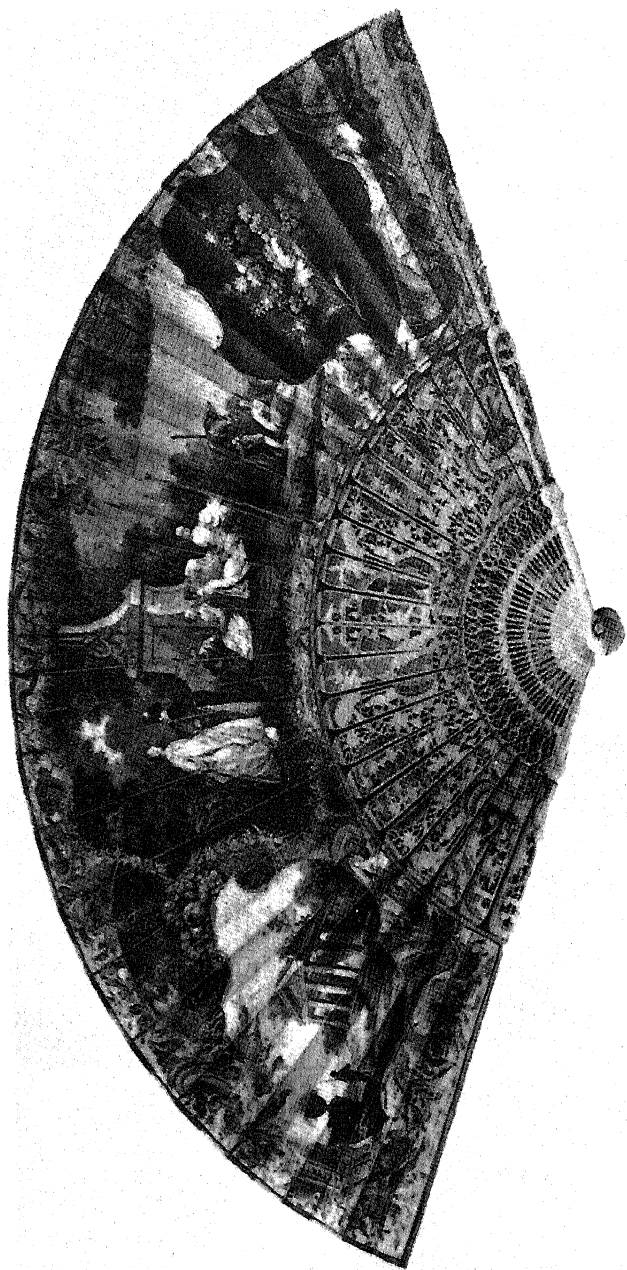
Another case in which an amateur collector overreached himself also happened in Liverpool: this time it was a grizzled and be-spectacled man called Benson, whose mean and acquisitive nature showed itself in a thin-lipped, down-drawn mouth. Benson was well-known for going to a dealer, pretending to sell him something in order to gauge its value and then touting it round to other dealers at a higher figure. There were two or three black marks against his name and consequently I was none too pleased when he came to me one day, wearing deep mourning and an air of pious resignation.

"My dear father died very recently, Mr. Duveen," he began, "and I am thinking of going into a smaller

house. A lot of my furniture will become superfluous, so I would like you to come round and make an offer for it."

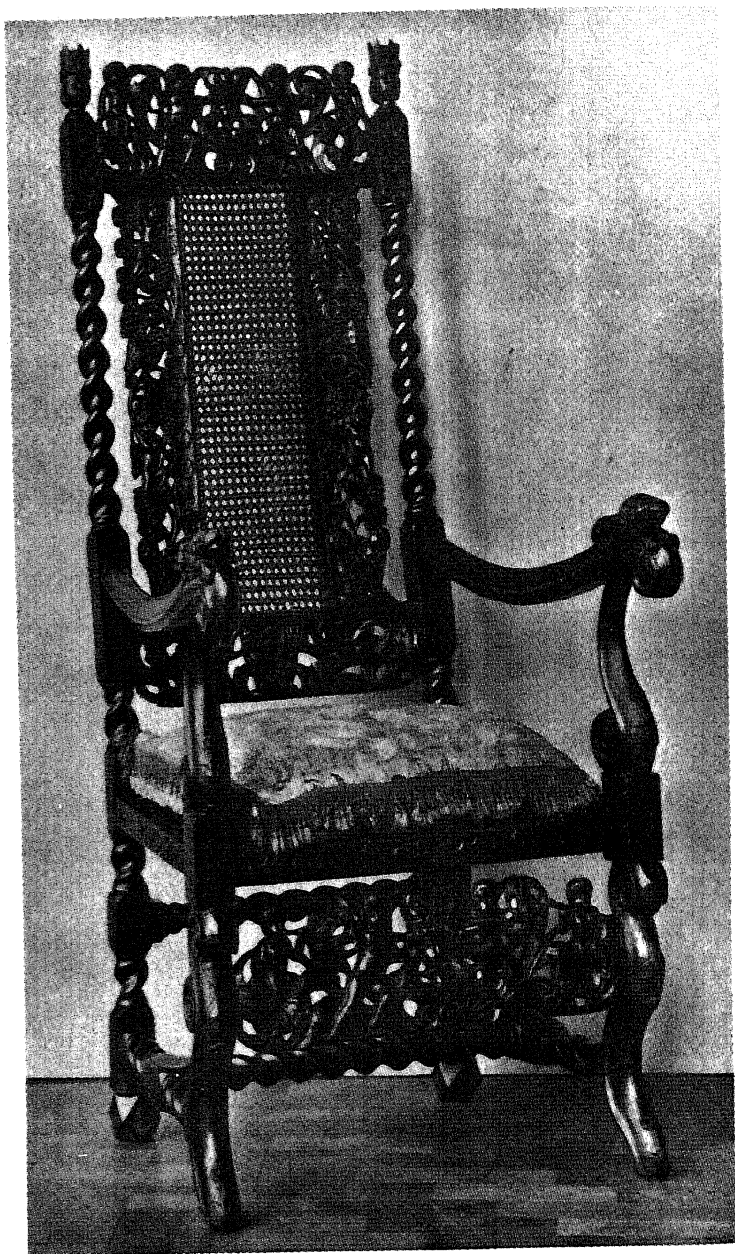
Remembering past incidents, I put him off with vague promises, and when he called in again twice the following week, I was too busy to attend to him. As luck would have it, my step-father came over from the Hague a little later and Benson buttonholed him and "told him the tale," with the result that I was told severely to attend more closely to business and not let prejudice interfere with possible profits! Hence it was not in the best of humours that I eventually called at Benson's house, where I was kept waiting for ten minutes in an early-Victorian drawing-room into which light filtered dimly through heavy velvet curtains. Had he but known it, his calculated rudeness put many hundreds of pounds into my pocket!

No sooner had I sat down than I leaped to my feet again to examine a very plain Chippendale tripod which was tucked away in a corner of the room. At some later date a screen had been fixed to it, but being wider and longer than the tripod it gave the whole thing an air of clumsiness. But that screen—one glance told me that the common wooden mouldings held one of those rare, fifteenth century Arras tapestries, interwoven with gold thread, which are almost priceless! it represented the Adoration of the Magi: as beautiful a bit of work as a connoisseur could ever hope to see. And now I was in a dilemma, because if I gave this precious Benson one hint of



A LOUIS XV FAN
(By courtesy of Countess Radolin)

[See Chapter XV



STUART "HIGH-BACK" CHAIR
(Victoria and Albert Museum)

[See Chapter XV

its real value he would hawk it round to half the dealers in the country, in his efforts to find "a better market," and a wrangle would begin which might last for months. I did think of buying at any price, but in the end decided to play a waiting game and make no offers for anything he wanted to sell. Just then Benson came in, washing his hands with amiability.

"Now take a good look round, Mr. Duveen, and just tell me what you'd like to buy. I have so much more than I shall be able to do with that you can have a waggonload of stuff!"

"Well, you know I don't deal much in old English furniture," I replied, "unless, of course, it is something very fine; so I must leave the prices to you."

It made me smile inwardly to see him preening himself: my supposed confidence in his special knowledge at once made him ask £10 for a plain Sheraton card-table which I could have got from any furniture dealer for about £3! That gives you a clue to his nature. I bought several quite nice bits of furniture, and, as I passed the Chippendale tripod, he stopped me.

"What do you think of that?"

"Ah!" said I, casually. "A nice plain bit of stuff, but the screen is quite out of keeping." Then, after just the right hesitation: "I rather like the tripod."

"Well, I'm certain you won't give me as much as I paid for it," he said with a sigh.

'At least a thousand pounds!' flashed through my mind. It would be cheap at the price.

"What *did* you pay?" I asked at last.

"Five pounds."

His shamefaced air and the sudden anti-climax set me guffawing with laughter, at which he looked very hurt.

"I wasn't such a fool as to buy it at that price, Mr. Duveen," he explained. "At one time I was living in London and got to know a young fellow called Perlant who dabbled in antiques. One day he came and told me he had lost very heavily at cards, but had scraped up the sum all but £25, and would I lend him that amount if he gave me this bit of tapestry, as security. I gave him the money and he subsequently paid me back £20 before going and drowning himself in the Seine: he was mixed up with some silver-faking affair and could not face the consequences. And so I got this tapestry for the odd fiver, and a bad bargain, too."

The callous way in which he spoke determined me to be even more than usually cautious. Presently I saw in a cabinet in the library two square Nankin vases with "Lange Lijzen" decoration of the Kang-He reign (1662-1722) and with the very rare "H" mark; also a pair of *famille verte* bowls of the same reign, decorated with the Imperial dragon. All four pieces were of a lovely quality and quite perfect. I took a plunge and knew instantly I had blundered.

"How much do you want for these two bowls and vases?"

Benson stared at them for a moment and shook his head.

"No. You must say what you'll give for them. I asked you prices on the furniture because I know more about it than you do; but here I leave it to you."

"I'll give £60 for the vases and £50 for the bowls."

That was a pretty good offer, but the effect on Benson was the opposite of what I had expected.

"*Pounds!*" he exclaimed, with gleeful surprise. Then, as I ought to have foreseen, he hedged instantly. "May I let you know about this in a few days? A member of my family has first option on them."

Raging inwardly at his trickery, I looked over the list of things I had bought.

"I make it £174."

"That's correct," he said.

"Is there anything to make it up to the round £200?"

"What about that Chippendale pie-crust table and the two Sheraton armchairs?"

"Not good enough, Mr. Benson. They are worth about £22; but if you'll throw in the Chippendale tripod and screen, I'll come to your figure. I won't buy the tapestry screen alone," I added, to put him off the scent.

"All right," he sighed. Then, completely forgetting his mythical relatives: "Won't you make it another £150 for the four pieces of porcelain?"

I shook my head.

"Very well: I accept your original offer of £110. I'll make out a detailed receipt while you are writing the cheque."

I was not going to trust this slippery customer with that lovely bit of tapestry for even one night; he was quite capable of going back on his bargain. Making an excuse that I wanted to show it to a friend, I took it and the porcelain away with me in a cab. That drive seemed unending, for I was on fire to examine my lovely Arras treasure in detail.

At last I got home: I don't remember eating any supper, but afterwards I took the tapestry out of that sordid frame and gloated over its unforgettable beauty. Of the finest possible texture, the very simple but beautiful colours glowed as freshly as though they had been dyed a few years ago. The subject was undoubtedly by the hand of one of the great Bruges masters: the Virgin seated sideways on a richly furnished bed and holding up the Child for the admiration of the kneeling Sages of the Orient. The dresses were represented in the most gorgeous embroideries and the ground around was strewn with many flowers, the so-called *mille fleurs*. At one side a small window gave a peep at blue mountains in the distance. A good rubbing and brushing with dried breadcrumbs restored the flesh tints in the Virgin, the Child and his adorers, to very nearly their original shades.

I did not go to bed till very late that night, and before I slept determined to catch a train next day and cross to the Hague, via Harwich, for my twentieth birthday. At all costs my mother must see that tapestry before it was sold! Thirty-six hours later, at seven in the morning, I was in our sun-dappled

"garden room" at the Hague, impatiently awaiting the arrival of my mother and breakfast. When the birthday congratulations were over, she said:

"What are you doing here so suddenly?"

"Oh, just to have a look at that suite of Empire furniture you have bought. I believe I have a client for it."

If she had been a modern, she would have said: "Oh yeah?" Thank goodness she used a pleasanter manner of expressing disbelief! But I kept up the pretence till breakfast was over, and then said quite casually:

"By the way, I've brought along a nice little Chippendale firescreen which would just suit this room."

When I brought it in neither my mother nor my step-father said one word: the beauty of its design and craftsmanship held them spellbound. Only after a long time did she speak.

"Where did you find it? And what did you pay?"

"Guess!"

"Fifteen thousand gulden?" (£1,250)

"*Four pounds!*" was my triumphant retort. I satisfied their instant demands for an explanation, and my mother, knowing the Radford and Benson type by long experience, agreed that I could have done nothing else.

"Now that it is here," she added, "I'm going to enjoy it for a few weeks before it vanishes into the collection of some wealthy connoisseur."

Three weeks later I sold it to a Parisian dealer for 45,000 francs, which was then roughly £1,800.

To-day that screen would be worth between £5,000 and £7,000, and I am sure that if only Mr. Benson could have known what I realised on what he "wouldn't pay a fiver for," he would have had an apoplexy from frustrated envy and greed!

Another adventure caused by the ignorance and rapacity of an art-dealer and a tout, ended far more advantageously for me than would have been the case had they tried to be less smart. It was while I was staying at the Adelphi Hotel, in Liverpool, that my old friend, Petty, the dealer, was announced so early that I was still breakfasting. Petty was in a state of great excitement.

"I've just got my hands on a set of twelve and two Stuart chairs," he said. "At least, I haven't actually got hold of them, because the devil won't tell me where they are!"

"Twelve and two" is the trade name for twelve single and two armchairs, and such a set would be a rarity indeed.

"Who is 'the devil'?" I asked.

"Holy Will! He came to see me at six this morning, saying he had just come in by train from the North."

Knowing "Holy Will" to be a hypocritical, psalm-singing tout of the worst type, I thought it more probable he had just come from the South and from not too far away, either!

"He wanted £25 at once and 5 per cent. commission if the chairs were sold through me: all that just for an address! I refused, but he wouldn't budge even when I asked him to come and see you."

I thought that quite probable. "Holy Will" had no liking for me, or I for him. It was only just after eight o'clock and if I acted at once there was a chance I might be able to get the requisite information elsewhere.

"Come on!" I said to Petty, jumping up. "We'll go and see your 'devil' now."

The clock of St. Luke's struck the quarter as we knocked at the man's door: he appeared unshaven, unwashed, and unlovely.

"About these Stuart chairs—I can do with a set," I began, whereat he grinned.

"Will you give me £50 and a ten per cent. commission, if I give you the address?"

Having merely doubled his price since seeing Petty, I told him I could offer a ten per cent. commission on sale and nothing more.

"No," he snapped. "I want my fifty quid first."

"Last time you gave me an address I found the things gone when I arrived," I retorted, "and so did Garlet and Jenes. You can't work that ramp again!"

In the end we left him and hurried back to the Adelphi. I determined to teach the tout a lesson, and told an assistant to ring up the most likely people in Liverpool and the neighbouring towns. By nine o'clock we had gone through the list, but not one of them had heard of the Stuart chairs. Then I had a brainwave.

"Here: get on to Mr. Clones, the builder in Parnford."

Clones was an old friend of mine, and we had scarcely begun to talk when he said: "Have you had my letter yet? About a set of Stuart chairs?"

I could have shouted with joy!

"No, I haven't. Are they in Parnford?"

"Yes. Perniss, the dealer, brought them in last night with a vanload of stuff from Carlett Hall."

"I'll be with you as soon as possible," I said, hanging up the receiver.

Within thirty seconds I was driving towards the cathedral city of Parnford, some fifty miles distant. I wasted no time with Perniss, but came to the point at once, and asked his price.

"They are still in my warehouse," he told me. "I want £500."

I could not help noticing the eager, watching look, and, unfortunately, I did not demur at this "round sum." But on the drive to the warehouse, he began to hedge.

"Oh, I forgot, Mr. Duveen: I've got a man from London coming to see this set."

The sign-manual of "dirty work!" The warehouse was really a large mansion filled with furniture, and as soon as I saw the chairs I knew I was on to a really good thing. They were unique not only on account of fine quality, but also because of their fine state of preservation. Carved in that profuse yet delicate style which distinguished the first years of the Restoration as against the exaggerated simplicity—the "proud humbleness"—of the Commonwealth, they certainly deserved the name of "tall-backs" in their

dignity and height. The carving appeared like bronze work by reason of two and a half centuries of beeswax and "elbow grease." "The find of a lifetime," was my instinctive thought.

"What will you take for them?" I said.

"Well, I don't know what to do—there is this other man coming."

Biting off a sharp retort, I passed on to look at some other things, and presently happened upon two very fine suits of fluted armour in the Maximilian style.

"What do you think of those?" asked Perniss. "At least eighty years old! Just the thing for you."

I nearly laughed: he was judging the age from the ugly Victorian oak pedestals on which they stood, whereas actually the suits were fifteenth century work! I decided to buy them at the man's own valuation and presently, as we were sitting in a tiny office, he came to the point.

"Well, can we do a deal, Mr. Duveen?"

"Yes. By the way, you haven't told me your lowest figure on the Stuart chairs yet. Did you give your London man a price?"

"No, I didn't write a price."

"Then how can there be any question of option or refusal?" I exclaimed. "You asked me £500 and I haven't refused yet: would you have broken your bond if I had accepted on the spot?"

He looked uncomfortable enough while I totted up the value of the various items I had bought.

"The whole comes to £835," I said.

"That includes the chairs?"

"Yes. What will you take for cash?"

He pondered for a minute or two, scribbling figures on a pad. Then:

"830, Mr. Duveen. I've already asked you the lowest prices."

"You certainly are generous," I replied, sarcastically. "£800 and I'll write the cheque now."

"No, I won't take less."

I murmured something about his being a hard nut to crack, wrote a cheque and obtained a detailed list from him. Then, as we were passing the armour again, he reverted to the subject.

"Won't you make an offer for the suits, Mr. Duveen? You can have them cheap for £80."

This was just what I had wanted.

"No, I don't think I can use them," I replied, with just the right amount of uncertainty.

"Well then, I'll throw in this steel mask as well."

He lifted a mask out of a mahogany wine-cooler and, on the instant, I realised that here was something worth three times the £80 he had asked for the lot! Still I hesitated.

"£75 then," he said, thrusting the mask into my hands.

I held it!

"All right; I like the mask."

I ordered a motor-lorry and very soon my purchases were in my own possession; a wise precaution with that type of dealer! In Liverpool next morning I telephoned a client for whom I had been fitting

out a very beautiful Tudor dining-room, and he came over right away to have a look at those lovely Stuart chairs.

"You've got me, Duveen," he exclaimed, at first sight of them. "How much are you going to 'do' me for?"

"I paid £500 for them," I replied, "and you are going to give me £1,300. Actually, they are worth nearer £2,000."

"You are right," he said, pulling out his cheque-book. "Lend me a pen, will you?"

The suits of armour were not quite all they might have been, because one or two missing parts had been replaced about a century earlier, by a good restorer. If they had been entirely original they would have been worth at least £10,000, but would still fetch about half that sum. I decided to keep them and send them to my country-house in Wales.

Over the whole affair I paid Mr. Clones, the Parnford builder, ten per cent. commission; while Petty got a further five. "Holy Will," however, claimed nothing at all, and for three or four months I was quite puzzled over that. He was not the type to let even a "bad" claim slip through his dirty fingers. Then one day I heard that he had gone to Perniss and had claimed *and got, ten per cent. for having sent me to him!* Perniss must have got the stuff for very little indeed, and I have often speculated as to which of us did best over the deal, according to our deserts!

CHAPTER XVI

HOW I LOST FIVE £20,000 VASES

FOR many years certain very mysterious happenings had been puzzling the art-dealing world in London, and to most of us these remained unsolved puzzles, until at last Mr. Frederick Alcker, confidential secretary to a great competitor, threw up his almost Ministerial salary rather than put up any longer with the bully who employed him. His employer, the well-known Mr. George, made the further mistake of persecuting his secretary through the various agents at his disposal. With most men this would probably have led to retaliation and a big libel case, but George knew his late secretary too well. Frederick Alcker was above pettiness of that type and ever since that time has been quite content with a much simpler mode of life.

"You never know when he won't try some double-crossing trick," Alcker told me one day when we happened to meet on holiday in the Isle of Man. "That was one of the reasons I threw up the most profitable job I've ever had."

For weeks, while we yachted and fished, Alcker was my constant companion, and to him I owe an intimate knowledge of some of the most exciting

intrigues, one of which, incidentally, resulted in a business duel and my own defeat. It is partly through this knowledge that I could piece together the great swindle perpetrated by Mr. George and Hugh Melmett on a rich American collector, who bought two "damascened" suits of Gothic armour at an outrageous price. Alcker completed for me the details of the following story in which I was one of the chief victims, making me promise I would disclose nothing until the death of certain of his former employers. As the latter died some time ago, I am absolved from secrecy, though I have changed names and certain details to avoid giving offence to innocent people.

Just about this time I had large offices and show-rooms on the first floor of a charming old Georgian house in Dover Street, Piccadilly, and to the restful rooms at the back many of my clients used to come regularly for tea and a chat in what seemed a pleasant oasis amidst the clatter of the West End. One afternoon I was sitting gloating over the beauty of one of a set of four black Chinese vases which I had bought some time previously and was jealously keeping out of sight. Just as I was about to lock it away, Lord Barklington was announced and, as we were great friends, I left the vase standing on a table where, bathed in a strong light, its beauties were fully revealed.

"Hullo, Duveen—that looks perfectly marvellous!"

"Not too badly judged!" I exclaimed with justifiable pride. "I have four of them; they are the

finest and most valuable examples of Chinese vases I've ever seen."

Lord Barklington seemed to go into a reverie, frowning and staring abstractedly at the carpet. Then:

"Jove, I've got it! Sir Gerald Burringham has a set of five—they're a bit smaller, but very like these."

"Would he sell, d'you think?" was my natural question. "If they are the real thing, I would give him a stiff price."

"The old man would be glad enough, if they are worth a lot of money. I happen to know that his nephew is costing much more than he can afford just now."

We discussed this exciting prospect from every angle while one of my young employees brought in tea and sandwiches. Lord Barklington promised to speak to Sir Gerald Burringham, who was a close neighbour, at the very first opportunity.

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It so happened that the next day Frederick Alcker and Mr. George were sharing a frugal lunch in their private office when there came a telephonic message that there was "a young man on private business waiting at the back entrance."

"Who is it?" said Alcker.

"He won't give a name, but he has seen Mr. George before."

"All right. Show him up."

"Well, Burton? What is it?" said George, at sight of the youth.

"Can I speak to you alone, sir?"

"Get on with it," replied the great dealer. "You can speak as freely to Mr. Alcker as to me, and if I'm not in you can always ask to see him."

"Lord Barklington has been talking about some black Chinese vases," he broke out hurriedly. "He was very excited; it must be something important, sir."

"Good boy!" said George, tossing him a sovereign. "Describe them carefully. Ah!" He glanced swiftly at Alcker, who produced a pocket-book and made a few notes. "Go on! Names and places, please."

The youth had scarcely finished when the dealer rounded on him.

"You got your patter pretty smart, young feller! I believe you've invented all this." His voice rose to a shout, "If you have, by God, I'll make you pay for it!"

Then, as suddenly, he was all smiles again. He tossed the lad another sovereign and waved him to the door.

"There may be a chance to earn that motor-bike I promised you," he said, as the youth bowed himself out. "You will receive certain orders and must carry them out to the letter."

George whipped round on Alcker, grim purpose in every line of him.

"What is the nearest station to the place the lad mentioned?"

"Crossways, in Loamshire."

"Who have we got in that neighbourhood we can

trust? Ah, I have it. Find out through Lord Wester whether Sir Gerald Burringham is at home—be discreet, and don't allow him to mention our name."

Within the hour the great dealer discovered that Sir Gerald had a slight cold and was confined to his house. As it was a six-and-a-half-hour train journey to Crossways, sleepers were booked and the next day Mr. George and Frederick Alcker drove up to Lord Wester's mansion, where the peer was persuaded to take them over to see Sir Gerald.

"Mr. George and his friend called on me," explained Lord Wester to Sir Gerald, "and I thought it would be a great pleasure for them to look over your fine old place."

An invitation to stay to lunch followed as a matter of course, and then the inspection began. The impatient dealer was taken through room after room, but there were no black Chinese vases anywhere. At last he decided to force a conclusion.

"I'm rather surprised to see you have so little Oriental china amongst all these charming things," he said. "As a rule one finds such a lot of decorative Chinese porcelain in old family mansions."

"We did have a good deal at one time," replied Sir Gerald, "but when my father succeeded, my grandmother took a lot with her to the Dower House and it never came back. However, I think we have some Chinese or Japanese vases upstairs: they always remained in my mother's boudoir. We hardly ever use that now."

"Oriental china is my particular hobby," murmured the persistent George. "Would it be possible for us to see them?"

It was obvious that Sir Gerald did not like the idea of taking this somewhat thinly-veneered "gentleman" into his late mother's private rooms, but after a momentary hesitation he said:

"I'll have the shutters pulled back and the sheets taken off the furniture, so that you can see the vases presently."

Mr. George, most eager to make a good impression, flattered his host and restrained his imperative, parvenu manners to an unwonted extent. At last a man-servant arrived to say that the rooms were ready and, on entering the boudoir, the dealer's eyes glistened with cupidity. A strong light from the windows fell on the vases, which were placed on the top of a high bookcase running almost the length of one wall. There could be no possible mistake as to the unusual quality and enormous value of the porcelain.

"How very decorative!" exclaimed George, in well-measured tones of admiration.

"I always thought they looked rather top-heavy on that bookcase," said Sir Gerald.

The dealer struck while the iron was hot.

"I know someone who would pay quite a good price to put them on *his* bookcase. Wouldn't you care to sell?"

"I've never sold anything out of the place," said Sir Gerald, rather stiffly. "I would only do so now

if these vases are worth a really considerable sum."

"How much will you take for them?" replied the dealer, a shade too eagerly.

"They might not be worth selling," was the calm reply. "Just now you remarked that they were merely decorative."

The too-clever George had over-reached himself and Sir Gerald, a retired diplomat, had taken his measure. Had the dealer commented openly on the value and beauty of the porcelain he could have bought them at a very fair price. But then, "fairness" and Mr. George were complete strangers! His next move made the diplomat even more suspicious.

"Well, I like them and wouldn't mind stretching the price a bit. Tell me what you will take, and if I can possibly do so, I'll buy them."

"What will you give?"

"Oh, on principle, we never make offers. We can't be buyers and sellers at the same time, and as you are the seller it is only right that you should name a price."

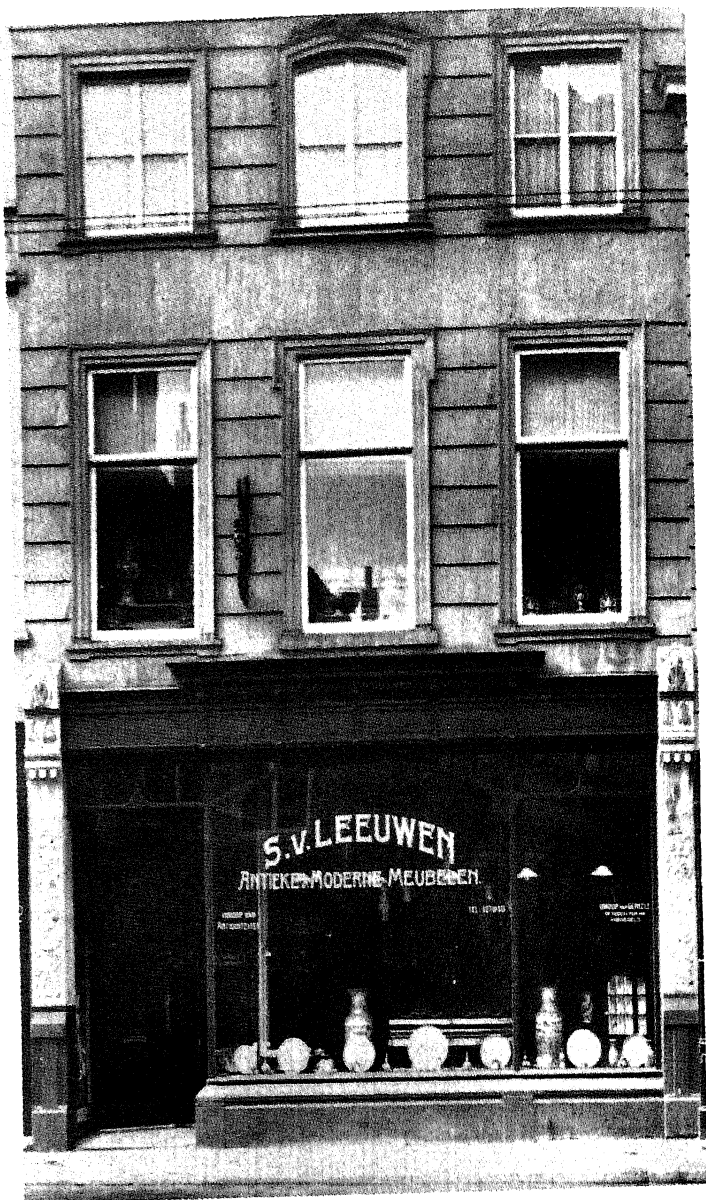
"I'm afraid you are mistaken," replied Sir Gerald, a trifle grimly. "It was you who asked me to sell. In addition, I am completely ignorant as to the value of the vases, so we need not pursue the subject farther."

This was a quite unexpected reverse for the dealer, who, however, never admitted himself beaten. His quick wits sought a solution to the problem.

"You misunderstand me, Sir Gerald," he purred. "I have every wish to give you full value and, to



FAMILLE NOIRE VASE
(Franks Collection, British Museum)
[See Chapter XVI]



JONKHEER VAN OLDENBARNEVELDT'S HOUSE IN THE NOORD EINDE AT THE HAGUE
 Now an antique dealer's shop

[See Chapter XVII

prove it, suggest that you have the porcelain valued at my expense. I will then give you ten per cent. above that price."

"Who would be competent—and not a dealer?" demanded Sir Gerald, seduced by this fair proposal.

"Why not consult Messrs. Burnett?" suggested Lord Wester, who had been an interested spectator of the duel.

"That seems a good idea, if Mr. George has no objection."

Lord Wester had done quite an amount of business for and through the dealer at one time and another, but even he had no idea how the wily George could turn the irreproachable reputation of the Burnetts to his own account.

"I'm not too friendly with the Burnetts," replied George, "but if you don't mention my name to them I'm willing to abide by their decision. You will thus get an entirely unbiased opinion on the vases. But as a possible client will be returning to America in a few days, I should be much obliged if you would write to Messrs. Burnett to-day. It will make all the difference if I can actually show my client the vases before he sails."

Sir Gerald agreed to this, and presently Lord Wester and the dealer, with Frederick Alcker, re-entered their car and were whirled down the long drive towards the lodge gates.

"Thanks very much for your lead over the Burnetts," exclaimed George. "It was just what I wanted."

Lord Wester did not know quite what that meant, but he comforted himself in the knowledge that a handsome "souvenir" would be forthcoming when the deal had gone through.

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While these events were occurring in Loamshire, I was busy arranging a big deal in Paris and had barely completed it before I received a telegram from my secretary in London.

"Lord B. telegraphs come immediately. Black vases."

Lord Barklington had evidently got busy and, excited at the prospect of purchasing a second set of black Chinese vases, I did not waste a moment. Telegraphing my secretary to meet me with car and chauffeur at Charing Cross, I arrived early in the morning to find that the chauffeur was ill. By road it was an eight-hour journey to Crossways, two hundred and eighty miles, so there was no time to lose. I slipped into the driving-seat and we slid through the traffic till, at last, on the North Road I could let my forty-five "horses" have their head. We did not dawdle, but not far from Buckden a huge Mercedes "go" shot past with a roar, nearly forcing me into the ditch.

"Damned inconsiderate hog!" I shouted to my secretary.

"That was Mr. George's car," he replied. "I know it well by sight."

It seemed odd to me that George, who was never fond of motoring, should be rushing North at so headlong a speed. However, I thought no more of

it, which was a pity. If only I had had an inkling of what was in the wind, I could have put a very thick spoke in that gentleman's wheel! Beyond Buckden the road forked and we made excellent time until, in the middle of a lonely stretch of moorland on a narrow patch of road over a bridge, I felt the unmistakable sort of "roll" which presages a deflating tyre. Getting out hastily, we discovered not one but three tyres studded with new hob-nails! What I said is best left to the imagination, because in those days we simply had to lever each tyre off the wheel, insert a new inner-tube and then do back-breaking work with the pump. A smart chauffeur could change a wheel in about twenty minutes, but we took nearer an hour and a half for the three and emerged with split finger-nails and frayed tempers. Before starting up again, I glanced at the petrol gauge.

"Getting a bit low. Just put a couple of cans into the tank—you'll find 'em stowed at the back. There's a third can holding water, so be careful."

When the petrol had been put in, I tried to start the engine, but a splutter from the carburettor told me there was trouble. After swinging the starting-handle till I saw a thousand sparks, I examined the flooding carburettor: no doubt about it, my secretary had been fool enough to put the tin of water into the tank!

"Of all the darned idiots!" I finished, "and after warning you, too!"

"But, Mr. Duveen, here is the water!" he replied, producing the full can.

Only then did it occur to me that here was dirty work. Someone had undoubtedly emptied my two spares: I had been carrying three cans of water! There was no garage within miles, so we busied ourselves in emptying the petrol-tank and cleaning and drying the carburettor. Eventually I begged a couple of gallons from a passing motorist and we arrived at Lord Barklington's mansion just as the stable clock was striking ten o'clock. We should have arrived soon after three-thirty!

"What a pity you were in Paris," exclaimed my friend. "If only I could have got at you earlier. The vases have gone!"

"How?" I asked, with a sinking heart.

"The day after I saw you in Dover Street, George, the dealer, turned up at Sir Gerald Burringham's place. He saw the vases, persuaded Sir Gerald to have them independently valued by Messrs. Burnett—and so he got them, plus ten per cent. I tried hard to get Burringham to wait till you had seen them," Lord Barklington explained, "but he had definitely promised George and wouldn't go back on his word."

The whole affair looked very queer, because so far as I was aware, no one knew anything about these black vases save Lord Barklington. It was true that George had a copy of that secret inventory of the great houses of England, made by one of the Wertheimers and one of the Benjamins; but that was away back in the '80's and at that time the value of this particular porcelain was not fully appreciated.

"I was there when George called to collect the vases," continued Lord Barklington. "Sir Gerald was quite put out by the speed with which the deal went through. George wrote out the cheque there and then and packed up the porcelain, saying that he had to go on to Liverpool to catch a client before he left for the States."

"What sort of figure did he pay?"

"£1,650."

Instantly I knew that, if the vases were indeed as my friend had described in minute detail, Sir Gerald Burringham had lost at least £15,000! No doubt at all that it had been George who had raced past me on the North Road, near Buckden. He had beaten me to it, but how he had done it I had not the slightest idea. I was to discover that later.

Two days after this I happened to be passing George's premises in London and there, sure enough, were Burringham's five black vases in the window. I stopped and stared. They were worth all of £20,000! At that moment George himself came out and took me by the arm, smiling in odious fashion.

"Lovely, aren't they? A real scoop, my boy!" Then, to an assistant who was waiting at the door. "Yes, Arthur, you can take them out of the window now!"

That was his mentality: he had had them put there for my benefit, wanting to crow over a beaten competitor.

It was Alcker who afterwards let light into the dark places of that transaction, because George's secret informant, who told him all about the vases, was none

other than young Burton, the employee who had brought us tea when Lord Barklington came originally to Dover Street and told me about Sir Gerald. Burton, too, had been bribed by George to empty the cans of petrol in my car at the right moment and substitute water; but it may be that the hobnails and my three simultaneous punctures at a critical juncture, was just an unlucky stroke of Fate. Burton may have got his motor cycle from George, but as it happened he also got the sack from me a little later, owing to quite a different matter. What happened after George had arranged with Sir Gerald to have the vases valued by Messrs. Burnett can be told in Alcker's own words.

"We got back from Crossways to London in a hurry," Alcker said. "George got on the telephone to Hugh Melmett, knowing that he was Burnetts' trusted valuer, and asked him to come round early next day to see him."

"‘Hugh,’ said George, ‘your firm will receive a letter from Sir Gerald Burringham, asking you to value five black Chinese vases. You will be sent down—there must be no mistake about that—and you will value them at £1,500.’"

"‘Oh, but suppose they're worth £15,000, Mr. George? Black Chinese porcelain might easily fetch that.’"

"George," said Alcker, "flew into a terrible rage. He cursed Melmett for ingratitude, threatened him with exposure to Messrs. Burnett and then tried to bribe him."

“‘What am I to get out of the transaction, Mr. George?’ asked Melmett at last, thoroughly cowed and browbeaten.

“‘£500!’ snapped the dealer. ‘And quite enough, too!’”

That was how Sir Gerald sold his beautiful Chinese vases, since, of course, he accepted the “independent estimate” of Messrs. Burnetts’ trusted adviser without hesitation. Had I only known what was happening behind the scenes, five minutes on the telephone might have put another £15,000 in his pocket! That porcelain was eventually sold by George, the “great” dealer, for £18,000!

CHAPTER XVII

THE TRAGEDY OF VAN OLDENBARNEVELDT

WHEN the great Honoré de Balzac wrote *Le Cousin Pons* in 1847, it was hailed as a masterpiece, though many people thought it an exaggerated picture. As it happened, some fifty years later it was capped by a true-life tragedy with which I was intimately concerned. In order to give you the true perspective for this story, you must know a little of the van Oldenbarneveldt family who were famous in Holland by reason of their great ancestor, John, who steered the struggling and foundering Ship of State of the Dutch Provinces to safety through the first forty years of their struggle against Spain. Then, in 1619, at the age of seventy-one and after a political and religious quarrel with the Prince of Orange, old John van Oldenbarneveldt was beheaded. This "political murder" led some of John's relatives to conspire against the Prince's life, and the discovery of their plotting resulted in the flight of practically the whole of the numerous family. To escape attention, many of them assumed different names, and ultimately, years afterwards, they returned to Holland, when they added the "Oldenbarneveldt" once more.

One of their descendants was Jonkheer de Raedt

van Oldenbarneveltdt, a bachelor who lived in a beautiful family house at the Hague with his old sister. Though extremely wealthy, they lived in quite simple fashion, and when I first met them were already getting on in years. The Jonkheer was a very clever and discerning collector of old pictures and works of art, and had inherited from his forbears a catholic taste as well as an enormous collection. Very few people, however, were ever allowed to see his treasures. The old gentleman often used to come to our place at the Hague to look over our antiques, and occasionally to make a purchase. I remember him as a tall, spare man with white hair and that impalpable air of distinction which denotes the erudite and much-travelled man of leisure.

Luckily for me and, as it turned out, for him, the Jonkheer took a fancy to me, and as a result I was privileged to see something of his vast collection of beautiful things, which had been formed by ten generations of art lovers. They were set out in his house in the *Noord Einde*, not far from the Royal Palace at the Hague. I remember particularly admiring a seventeenth century Delft imitation of a late Ming Chinese plate, the more interesting because both the Chinese original and its much more valuable copy stood together at the back of a William III glass cabinet.

“Very good—excellent!” exclaimed the old man, rubbing his hands. “You have sharp eyes, my boy. In this dim light many a connoisseur would not have known the difference!”

He took down the two plates and allowed me to handle them. Neither he nor I dreamed at that moment what an enormous influence this kindly act was to have on his future.

Years passed and I became a partner in my stepfather's business, being in full control of the English branch. Now and then I paid a buying visit to Holland, and one day, being at the Hague, thought I would look in on old Jonkheer van Oldenbarneveldt. I rang the bell, which was answered by a man-servant with a lowering countenance and suspicious air. "No, you cannot see the Jonkheer," he replied to my question. "He is ill and sees no one."

"A surly sort of devil!" was my thought, and on the way home I wondered vaguely why such a charming and courteous old man should retain so unpleasing a butler.

"Oh, the Jonkheer has been ill for some time, now," my mother told me over lunch. "But I hear that those two servants look after him and his sister in devoted fashion. Indeed, the old man's relatives have been rather unkind to him, and it is quite remarkable how much better his own servants have behaved!"

I dismissed the matter from my mind, and it was not until some months had elapsed that I again called at the house in the *Noord Einde* to see how my old friend was faring. The same man-servant opened the door as on the previous occasion, and at sight of me his brows drew into a scowl.

"How is the Jonkheer this morning?"

"You are the young man who called some time ago? Well, I've told you before—he can't see anyone."

"You have a very good memory for faces! I only wanted to enquire after his health."

"Well," snarled the man in a rough manner, "we have enough work to do without answering the front-door bell all day long!"

With that he closed the door in my face and I was left standing on the step! With considerable annoyance I turned away: the fellow had most certainly exceeded his duty, and his crude manners stamped him as anything but a "devoted servant." Even my mother's explanation that old servants often presumed on their position, and grew irritable with anyone save their own masters, did not seem to me a feasible one. Gradually a feeling of uneasiness gripped me, an intuitive foreboding of evil. My step-father laughed at my suspicions, but that very afternoon I was to have them confirmed in rather surprising fashion. He and I had gone to have a look at some Chinese porcelain, and as we pottered round one or two dealers' shops I began to feel we were being followed. Suddenly I turned to my step-father.

"I think I'll leave you here," I said. "I want to spend half-an-hour studying some things at the Maurice House." (The Hague Picture Gallery.)

"Right," he replied. "I'll find my own way home."

On coming out of the Maurice House I saw the man I had suspected, standing idly on the opposite corner. He turned away as I walked towards home and, so soon as I came to a shop-window, I stopped

and used it as a mirror. Sure enough my man had halted and now began to follow me along the other side of the street! A little thrill went up my spine. Here was adventure, and I was young enough to welcome it with open arms. But I decided to say nothing more to my mother, who might be needlessly alarmed. First of all I wanted real proof that I was being shadowed: then would come the problem of finding the reason.

Next morning I did not see my "shadow," but two days later as I went about my business in the town, I became aware of a youth walking along beside his bicycle. Now in Holland everyone uses a cycle, but somehow I felt certain that I had noticed this straw-haired lad of about sixteen once before that morning. Wishing to make certain, I took a cab to Scheveningen Wood and there, at the entrance, was my cyclist again! Walking along the woodland paths I caught glimpses of him now and then through the trees, for he was compelled to keep to the main road. He was very careful to remain at a distance, but his every move made me more certain that I was being followed for some reason. What that could be I had no idea. Yet all the time my mind was running on that silent house in the *Noord Einde* where poor old Jonkheer van Oldenbarneveldt lay sick: that house which was so rich in art treasures and where the lowering butler turned away innocent enquirers!

By this time, what with turning the problem over in my mind, and being followed by unknown people, I began to feel that I was in the midst of some queer

William le Queux intrigue. But, more than anything, I wanted to find out how far these spies would follow me. Returning home, I went out again almost at once and walked to the Central Tram Station. Boarding a car for Delft, just six miles from the Hague, I watched carefully for my cyclist. There he was, sure enough, keeping well to the rear; but he followed only to the outskirts of the town. Then he dropped away and disappeared. I had the answer to one half of the problem: my "shadow" was only interested in my movements *so long as I remained in the Hague itself!* Therefore, whoever the "Master Spy" might be, he did not care what happened beyond the bounds of the city. Now I went straight to an old friend of mine, Teunissen, the Dutch dealer, and explained the facts to him.

"No, Duveen," said he, having heard my tale, "I think this Oldenbarneveltdt affair is a mare's nest which originated in a too-fertile imagination. I'm sorry, but can you really imagine some sinister crook having you followed all over the place? The idea is ridiculous!"

"No," I replied slowly, feeling that he was right, "I suppose not. Yet I'm certain that something is wrong at that house in the *Noord Einde*. The old man used to be so charming, to like me so much. He would never have turned me away with rudeness."

"Well, you can't go to the police," said my friend. "You have nothing tangible to go upon: no evidence of any kind."

"Hasn't the Jonkheer got a solicitor?" I asked.

Teunissen shook his head.

"He's a self-reliant, obstinate old cuss. So far as I know, he hasn't employed a lawyer for years."

"Well, what about your own? Can't we get expert advice anywhere?"

His own lawyer knew nothing of the Jonkheer: we seemed up against a dead-end. I was nervously walking up and down the vast salon while he chewed the stump of a cigar. Now and then he coughed raspingly. All of a sudden I turned to him:

"Teunissen, is there any Hague dealer who has recently been pretty flush? Who has obviously been making money?"

He sat back, pinching his lips between forefinger and thumb. For quite a time there was silence. Then he followed my line of thought.

"Youngster, maybe you've hit on something! I know most of the dealers in Holland, especially in the Hague. Between you and me, there are one or two fellows who *have* made quite a lot of money recently. Big money, too. Yes, that's rather mysterious!"

He explained that the two men he had in mind had been in quite a small way of business: maybe they had cleared 5,000 gulden (£400) in a good year, but were definitely not in the first flight. Then, mysteriously, they had made journeys to Paris and London: at any rate, without ostensible reason both men had begun to live somewhat luxuriously.

"That is funny," concluded Teunissen, "because when I went into their shops I found nothing of any

importance at all. In fact, I'm hanged if I know how they *do* make their money."

"Let's go round to their places now," I urged. "No harm in having a look round, and we might possibly pick up some information."

We did so and, as luck would have it, once again my straw-haired cyclist was at work. Teunissen and I were just coming out of Kander, the second dealer's shop, when the lad rode up and stopped within a few feet of us. I stopped and stared at him, itching to give him a clip under the ear! Then, suddenly, he lost his head. He wheeled his cycle over the pavement towards the dealer's door, changed his mind, turned about, upset his machine and then swung his leg over and wobbled off in the devil of a hurry. Even Teunissen remarked on his behaviour, not knowing that this was my faithful "shadow." When I told him he looked quite serious.

"Odd," he growled, "very odd. If you're right, Duveen, we'd better go back to my house and talk this thing over. For some reason Kander is having you followed."

Though Teunissen was a great friend of the Chief of Police, it was useless to go to any official with a story which might be characterised as "sheer cock-and-bull!" At last he took me by the arm.

"Let's go in and have tea. My wife will be glad to see you."

Soon I was seated in the Teunissens' Louis XVI

drawing-room, surrounded by lovely *objets d'art*. Madame Teunissen presided over the tea-table, a gracious and motherly woman who put me at my ease. She was in the act of handing me a cup of tea when my eye caught something: my hand slipped from the saucer and a stream of hot tea ran across her priceless seventeenth century Smyrna carpet! Luckily the cup was not broken, but behind my stammering excuses for such clumsiness a hammer was beating in my brain. I could scarcely wait before pointing an urgent finger towards one corner of the room.

"What is it?" she smiled good-naturedly.

"Teunissen!" I cried. "Those plates—where did you get them? How long have you had them?"

"Oh, a woman brought them to the door about a week ago and asked a hundred gulden (£8) for them. Of course, she did not realise their value."

"Did you get her name and address?"

"I believe so. What is the worry, anyway?"

"Are you sure?" I cried, springing to my feet and going over towards the plates. "Because that old Chinese plate and its copy in Delft belonged to the Jonkheer van Oldenbarneveldt: I've seen them—handled them, myself!"

Teunissen swung round in his chair, giving me a tolerant smile. He must have thought me crazy.

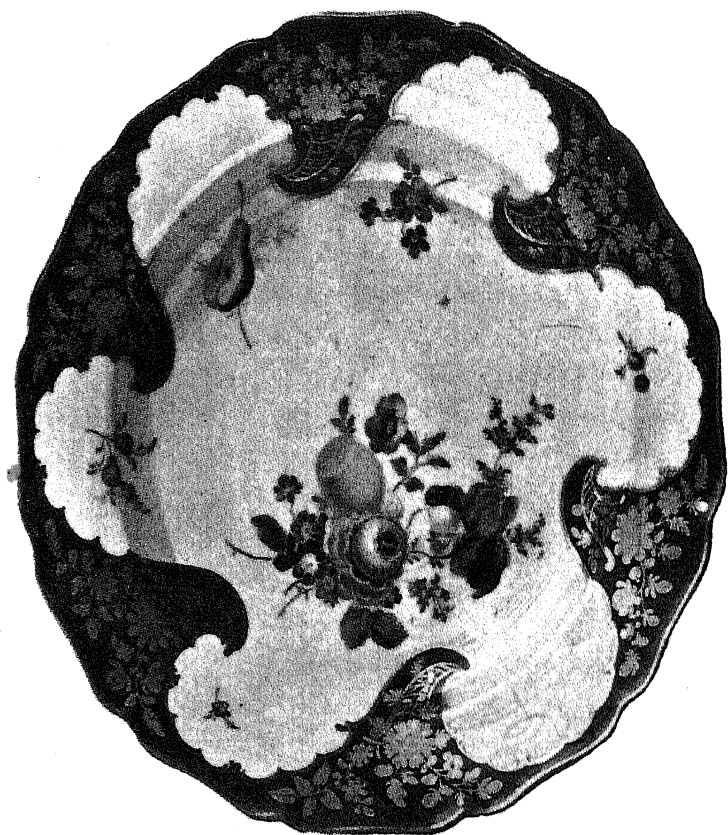
"Well—this mare's nest again?"

I swung round on him.



OLD DELFT POTTERY PLATE BY ALBERT DE KEYSER
Copies from a Chinese porcelain plate of the Ming dynasty

[See Chapter XVII]



"CLARET" WORCESTER PLATE
(British Museum)

[See Chapter XVIII]

"No. But have you ever seen late Ming plates of that pattern? You have! So have I. But I'll bet you've *never* seen a Delft replica of them! In all the years you've been in the art trade, I'll swear you haven't."

"No-o-o!" he muttered. "Come to think of it, I most certainly have not."

"What's the address that woman gave you?" I barked. "A hundred-to-one it was false!"

After a brief search in one of the innumerable little courts along the densely-inhabited Uileboomen (Owls Trees) we found her "address": no one had ever heard of her. Teunissen whistled gently to himself as we returned.

"Yes: we must act now," he muttered. "But I can't afford to be cited as witness in any notorious law case. You know what the Dutch Courts are like when it comes to delays and enquiries: I shouldn't be my own master for two years!"

In the end and after a long argument, we arranged that Teunissen should secretly pass word to old Jonkheer van Oldenbarneveldt's relatives so that, keeping him out of the affair, the police might be induced to act. Our plan worked marvellously, since it appeared that the police themselves had not been too happy about that strange, silent house in the *Noord Einde*. At one time the relatives had even contemplated a civil action to give them access to the old man's house so that, at any rate, they could

estimate the value of the recluse's treasures; but Teunissen's whisper was sufficient.

Next day a plain-clothes detective rang the bell of the mysterious house. When the butler opened the door he was pushed aside and several other men, who seemed to spring from nowhere, ran past him. A locked door of an upstairs room had to be forced and there the old Jonkheer and his sister were discovered in a pitiable condition. Ever since the old collector had had a cold, both he and his sister had been kept locked for months in one room by the scoundrelly pair of "devoted servants." The prisoners were in an indescribably filthy condition, being covered with vermin. With wild, uncombed hair and faces stamped with utter despair, these highly-cultured people had been forced to live the life of wild animals! The Jonkheer and poor old Freule (Lady) van Oldenbarneveldt were at once removed to a nursing-home, but in her case at least, release came too late. Driven insane by her privations, she died very shortly afterwards: having virtually been murdered by her erstwhile servants. The old man was saved by a narrow margin, but so emaciated and haggard had he become that I scarcely recognised him.

As a result of the butler's confession, the police arrested a blacksmith and an antique-dealer called Kander, within a few hours, but, as is usual in such cases, each swore that the others were mainly to blame. The man-servant alleged that the dealer

had tempted him to sell portions of the Jonkheer's collection, but this was disproved by the fact that he had already sold many items before he met the man; while the blacksmith swore that it was the dealer who had hired him to force open the locked doors of the great salon which housed the most valuable things. The case against Kander was so strong that the *juge d'instruction* ordered him to be kept under preventive arrest and, while in the cells, his little son was run over and killed. That broke his heart, I think, and when he was eventually released on bail my friend, Teunissen, lent him sufficient funds to fight his case, since most of the man's money was locked up in his stock. When the case came on, it was found that Kander had left the country; but he and all the other accused were each sentenced to two years' imprisonment. Kander appealed against this "absent sentence" and, on the plea that the only evidence against him was offered by criminals and that there was no other substantiation of the charge, managed to get the verdict quashed.

The butler, knowing my connection with the art world and of my friendship with his master, had arranged with Kander to have me watched on my brief visits to the Hague.

During the long criminal proceedings, poor van Oldenbarneveldt had recovered some of his strength, but he steadfastly refused to return to that house in the *Noord Einde* which held such tragic memories. He lived now in a charming private hotel at the

Hague, awaiting the Court's verdict as to whether he could recover many of his treasures which had been found in Kander's shop. It was at this time that I saw him again, and I shall always remember the look of suffering which even his welcoming smile could not hide.

"I can never thank you enough for what you did," he said, taking my hand. "Teunissen has told me everything: had it not been for your suspicions and your warning, I should not be here now." Then he turned in his chair to a table at his side and removed a cloth, beneath which I glimpsed those two fateful plates, the Chinese original and its Delft copy. "You have a very excellent memory, Duveen," he continued, holding out the plates to me, "and I would like you to keep these always as a memento of having saved my life."

I did not pretend to refuse so very acceptable a gift: the old man's kindly thought forbade it. The thrill of that moment is still with me, but it was the last time I was to see the Jonkheer van Oldenbarneveldt. The decision of the Court of Appeal robbed him of his treasures and broke him up. He spent his few remaining years in trying to buy back the scattered pieces of his own collections, but had not nearly completed his self-imposed task before death overtook him.

CHAPTER XVIII

DOUBLE-CROSSED BY A "FRIEND"

As I have often had occasion to remark, the reminiscences which most of my friends seem to prefer are concerned with some of my least profitable deals. Mayhap it is human-nature to enjoy seeing an "expert" discomfited, since then the "mighty" do indeed fall! The following story deals with just such a case: it also throws a very lurid sidelight on a maxim only too well known to anyone in the "trade"—*Never trust your own brother when it comes to an art deal!*

There was at one time a friend of mine called Ardin, who was becoming one of the "great ones" of Bond Street. He had brought off several rather spectacular *coups* and was known as a "warm" man. Ardin was an intimate of one of my cousins and, by ill chance, he had gone a little outside his own speciality in buying from my relative two very fine Chinese porcelain vases of an extremely rare type. He had also incurred the displeasure—and jealousy—of one or two of the more powerful art dealers in London, and as a result suddenly found that he, who had a wide reputation for getting big prices, could not get rid of his vases save at ruinous loss! The fact was that in a few weeks that lovely

porcelain had been "spoiled" by his enemies, who by an untraceable word here and there had spread the idea that they were not exactly "right!" That kind of malevolent revenge is often to be found, no matter how august the art circle concerned: the more powerful the dealer, the more easily can he damn a picture or a vase by faint and rather hesitating praise.

Ardin and I gradually became very friendly indeed, but, because our specialities lay rather far apart, I never actually did business with him or through him. One day he asked me round to his rooms and showed me the vases, of which I had already heard a good deal. I was absolutely overcome by their beauty. They were of the Kang-He reign (1662-1722) decorated in *famille verte* style and of a glorious quality. It was known that they had been presented to Louis XIV by the Emperor Kang-He. It was also obvious that they must have been handed down in the French Royal Family as being of great value, as, during the reign of Louis XV, they had been further embellished by ormolu bronze ornaments around the tops and bottoms. This was the work of that great metal-worker, Gouthière, creator of some of the finest bronzes during the time of Louis XV and XVI. His appreciation of the value of these vases was so great that the artist had not pierced the porcelain to attach his mounts. Instead, he had left these loose with leather cushions on the insides, a precaution which in my experience was quite unique.

"Tom," I said to Ardin at last, "you need not worry

about these vases. They are some of the finest I have ever seen and are absolutely genuine!"

"Will you sell them for me, then?" he asked eagerly. "I'll go fifty-fifty with you on the profits."

Knowing the trickery he had been up against, I agreed at once. Indeed, I sold them the very next day for £4,000, which gave each of us the useful little profit of £600. Ardin was overjoyed at getting rid of the porcelain which he had feared would have to be sold at a loss, and at dinner that night we discussed a holiday near Bettws-y-coed, where I hoped to do some otter-hunting. He asked if he might accompany me, and as we talked in the north-bound train next day he happened to refer to his latest deal.

"Do you know, Duveen," he said, "that I've been offered a whole dinner-set in 'claret' Worcester? It belongs to a nobleman and has never come on the market before!"

"That sounds like £10,000 to me," I replied, for "claret"-coloured Worcester is one of the rarest and most valuable types of this beautiful ware.

"At the very least," murmured Ardin, "I shall be able to get it at the right price, too."

"Rather a pity that English porcelain is not much in my line," I said. "If it were, I should have liked to come in on a half-share deal with you."

"You're quite welcome to come in, Jack. You did me a wonderfully good turn over those *famille verte* vases and I'd be happy to do you one in return."

"No, Tom," I smiled. "I don't want to take something for nothing. If the deal had been more in my line I would have been only too glad, but, hang it, I can't be of sufficient use to you to claim half the profits! I have no clients for 'claret' Worcester, but you certainly have."

"Yes, but you are much cleverer than I am at getting really big prices. If you come in, you'll probably get nearly twice what I could."

"All right," I agreed. "But only on condition that I put up the whole of the cash required for purchase. I think you said £3,500?"

It was arranged that we should thus go into what is called "joint-account," and after a long week-end in North Wales, Ardin made arrangements for the porcelain to be sent from this nobleman's house in the Midlands to his agent's office in London. There, in a back room where it was set out on long trestle tables, we inspected the whole set, which comprised more than a hundred pieces. The decoration was purplish-pink or "claret" ground in which were little white panels, each of which contained a Watteau pastoral scene. It was the most valuable type of English porcelain you could wish to find. After inspection, I took Ardin on one side.

"Tom: this certainly looks all it ought to be, but I feel a little disappointed about the quality of those Watteau panels. What do you think of them? After all, this is your speciality."

"Well, Jack," he replied, "I don't suppose I've seen much more 'claret' Worcester than you have.

You know how rare it is. But I've never seen it at all before with those Watteau figures, so I'm in the same boat as you!"

I examined the pieces again with great care, but could see nothing wrong. Ardin had insisted that I should negotiate with the agent, so we came to grips forthwith.

"Well, Mr. Jones, I've had a good look at this porcelain and I'd like to discuss a few points with you. I gather that the set belongs to an English nobleman, and as I'm dealing with someone in a responsible position I won't ask for credentials to cover me against buying entailed property. But do you think that your Principal will allow you to disclose his name if we can come to terms?"

"I'm quite certain His Lordship would never consent to that," replied Mr. Jones, very firmly.

As that kind of thing was not infrequent, I did not insist.

"Now as to price: Mr. Ardin tells me you are asking £3,500. What is your lowest price for a cash-down sale?"

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Duveen," said the agent, "but I have no power to bargain or to take anything less than the stipulated amount. It will have to be £3,500 or we cannot do business."

I never waste time over a deal which is at all possible.

"Very well, Mr. Jones, I understand your position. I accept the set at your figure, but I want you to concede me a favour. Will you ask your client

whether, in case this Worcester is sold to a private collector, he will allow you to disclose his name to that gentleman under seal of secrecy. I ask that because it may make a very great difference in the selling of the set."

The agent shook his head doubtfully.

"From what I know of His Lordship, I think there is very little chance of his consent."

"How soon can you get a reply?"

"To-morrow, if he telegraphs; two days if he writes."

"Good. Then here is my cheque for the ten per cent deposit—£350, and I'll pay the rest when I take delivery."

He gave me an invoice with a credit-note for £350 on account, and two days later I heard from Tom Ardin that the nobleman concerned had refused flatly to allow his name to appear under any circumstances. We were expected that afternoon at the office of Mr. Jones to take delivery of the set. The agent was most apologetic, but I quite understood in what a difficult position he was placed. Sitting down I wrote out a cheque for £3,150 and was just on the point of handing it over when once more my eye went to the porcelain lying on the trestle tables. In spite of Ardin's enthusiasm, it still disappointed me a little.

"Mr. Jones," I exclaimed, still holding the pink slip, "you have told us that this Worcester is the property of an English nobleman and it was on that understanding I paid a deposit. Now, before I pay

over the rest, would you mind writing out a receipt and just adding a few words to that effect?"

While a man might count four, the agent hesitated. More significant, he shot a lightning glance to where Ardin was standing at one side.

"I can scarcely do that," he murmured.

"Then the deal is off!" I snapped, tearing the cheque in half.

"Oh, if you are going to take it so tragically, I'll write whatever you want."

"Too late, Mr. Jones. There is something a little odd about this transaction, otherwise you would not have hesitated to put in writing the very arguments and representations you have made from the start! What's more, I shall stop payment of the first cheque for £350."

When we got outside, Ardin caught my arm.

"My God, you're clever, Jack! You caught him beautifully. I'm sure there is something fishy about the business."

"I'm not satisfied about the 'thinness' of those Watteau panels, Tom. I admit they *look* all right, but just as I was giving him the money some instinct or other made me hesitate."

After this affair Ardin struck a very bad patch indeed: everything he touched seemed to go wrong, and time after time he lost large sums of money. Finally, about two years later, he came to me and asked my help, which I gave gladly enough. It was about this time that I happened to be dining with one of the greatest specialists in English porcelain

and, over the coffee and brandy, he made some reference to a deal which reminded me of the "unknown nobleman."

"By the way, Ted," I said, "did you ever hear of a 'claret' Worcester dinner-set, with Watteau scenes, being put on the market?"

"Why?" he asked, shooting a cautious glance at me.

"Only for my personal satisfaction. Some time ago I nearly bought one at a fairly stiff price, on the advice of poor Tom Ardin. He is pretty well on-the-rocks nowadays."

"*What?*" snapped my host. "Ardin wanted you to buy that set? How did it come about?"

"Oh, he offered me a half-share because I had just done him a good turn over some Kang-He vases. It was arranged that I should put up the whole purchase-price."

For quite a long time Ted sat staring in front of him, saying nothing. I felt that he did not want to pursue the subject, but was determined to get to the bottom of the matter.

"Come on, Ted. You must tell me more now. Otherwise I might think that you were concerned in the deal!"

He sat up as though I had pricked him.

"No, no, Duveen! I wasn't, but I do know the history of that set. It is old Worcester, right enough. *But the decoration—'claret' ground and all—was done about three years ago!*"

"Go on!" I snapped, as he hesitated.

"Ardin was in joint-account with Z and they had the work done together. Very clever it was, too."

When I lifted my liqueur glass my hand trembled so violently that I spilled a few drops. An echo of Ardin's words came back to me when we had been northward-bound in the train and had discussed the "rose" set: "*You're welcome to come in with me, Jack—I'd be happy to do you a good turn!*" And that, after having put an unexpected £600 in his pocket! He and Z could only just have had what Ted called "that work" done in secret! The "unknown nobleman" never existed, and his "agent" in London must have been an accomplice in the swindle. Another illusion gone, another "friend" discovered to be little more than a Judas. I got to my feet.

"I feel stifled, Ted. I'm sorry—forgive me—I think I'll be getting home."

My host stretched out his hand.

"Look here, Jack—don't say——"

"That's all right. No one shall hear a word. I don't want Ardin to know I've discovered the truth. You see, I'm helping him out of the hole he's in and—I *will* see him through with it. Good night!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE CURSE OF THE "MALEVOLENT GODS"

No matter how we, of the twentieth century, may pretend to scorn superstition, there can be little doubt that for some inexplicable reason unhappiness, poverty and even death, do attach themselves to certain objects. Scores of fully authenticated histories can be brought to prove this contention, nor do they always concern mediæval treasures. It is even stranger that that brilliant and heroic figure, Edgar Gorer, was dogged by misfortune through the possession of what he called "the Malevolent Gods."

Edgar Gorer, a specialist in old Chinese porcelain, had forced himself into a leading position amongst London art dealers by sheer cleverness and courage. That his courage was not confined to business was amply proved by his tragic end. Gorer started with nothing and, within ten years, was certainly worth (on paper) something like £500,000, but from what I know of the circumstances, if he had lived, that fortune might have dwindled to nothing. Ill luck dogged him ever after he acquired "the Gods," and it was only the seven years of hard work and negotiations undertaken by a devoted friend which saved a very fair income for his dependants out of the wreck

of his fortune. As I have said, Gorer was led too far by his rashness.

"One of the greatest factors in my success," he once told me, "has been courage in buying and selling. I have always admired your late uncle, Sir Joseph Duveen; I take him as my pattern."

Now it requires a great deal of experience to deal successfully in the rarer types of Chinese porcelain of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and of the three reigns of the Tsing Dynasty, beginning with the Kang-He reign (1662-1795). These pieces are so valuable and so scarce that it is extremely difficult for the would-be expert to study them sufficiently to avoid calamitous mistakes. Maybe it was this lack of experience which brought him into trouble. Or was it the alleged evil influence of that pair of gigantic figures in the style of the early Kang-He reign?

"What do you think of them?" he asked me one day, when he had been showing me round his collection. "They are Ming, of course, and of the very finest type, too."

I did not dare explain to him that, according to the colouring, they could not possibly be attributed to so early a period. Indeed, unless I was sorely mistaken, this "Ming" had come comparatively recently from the same kiln as that which supplied a similar figure bought by Bob Partridge at Maple's for a matter of £18!

"I got them from a man who told me that they

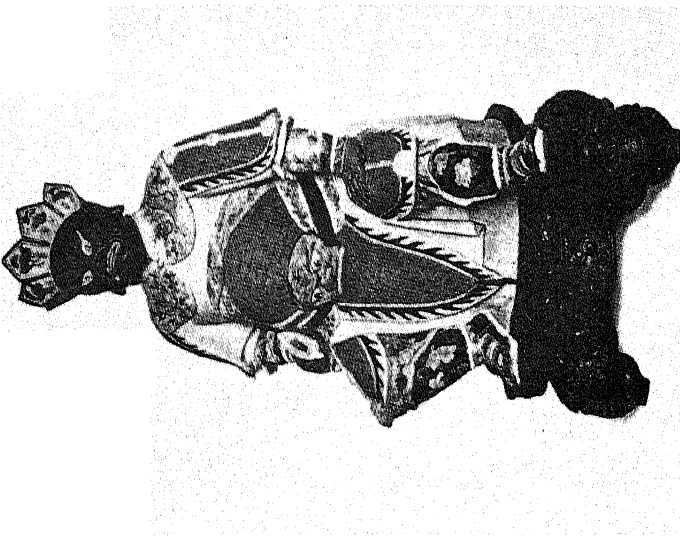
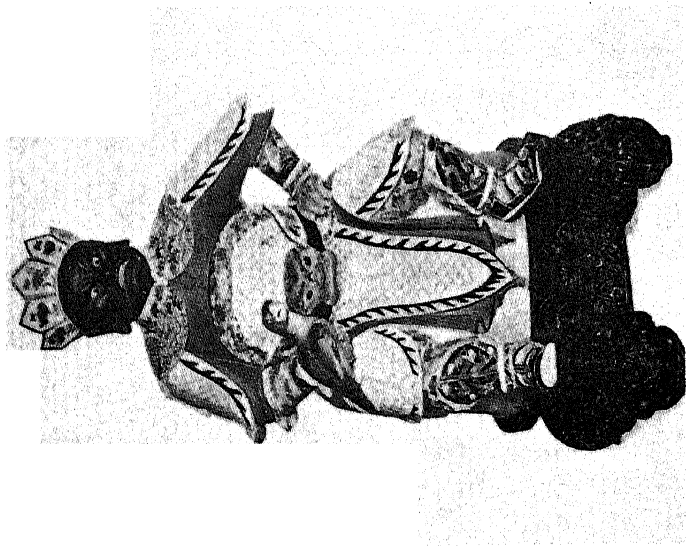
were called 'The Malevolent Gods,'" he continued. "I don't quite like the name, Duveen, because as you know, I'm a gambler, and superstitious. You don't think they'll bring me bad luck, do you?"

I laughed the matter off, thinking that his worst luck was in having bought the things at all! At this moment I did not know their history, but he said the figures were part of the very famous Richard Bennett collection which he had purchased for some £200,000. He now proposed to exhibit the whole collection at his premises in New Bond Street. He did so and the world of art lovers, including Queen Mary herself, passed in front of cases which certainly did hold some of the finest Chinese porcelain you could wish to see. Old Pierpont Morgan, that deity and terror of the dealers, came to examine the collection on a day he knew Gorer would be absent. He had been prejudiced against the young man by some of the people who surrounded him.

"I like those 'Malevolent Gods,'" he told the friend who was taking him round. Then, in his usual autocratic fashion. "Those two or three things I pointed out—tell Gorer I'll take the lot for £32,000."

It meant that, apart from the minor purchases, he was offering £30,000 for "the Gods." There was some hitch over the affair and next day the American multi-millionaire returned to treat in person with Gorer. The latter proved unexpectedly obstinate.

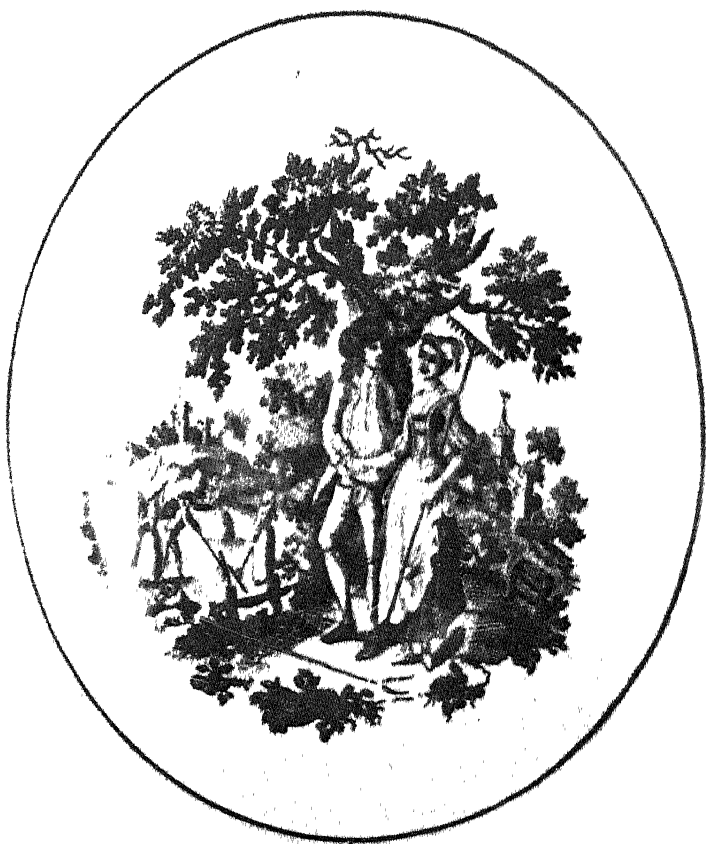
"I won't take a penny less than £40,000 for my figures," he told Morgan.



THE "MALEVOLENT GODS"

The imitation Ming figures for which Pierpont Morgan, the elder, offered £30,000. They are each 32 inches high

[See Chapter XIX



WORCESTER DISH

Which inspired the "Watteau" panels on the faked "Claret" dinner set
(Victoria and Albert Museum)

[See Chapter XVIII]

"Well," snapped the great man, "if Chinese porcelain has gone to such prices, I'm a seller, not a buyer!"

Gorer admitted to me afterwards that his refusal of this £30,000 sale was the beginning of the "malevolent" influence, but I'm not so sure. Had he sold them to the American, he would certainly have dug his grave as a specialist in Chinese porcelain!

A forceful newspaper campaign stimulated public interest in the Bennett Collection, and a sumptuously illustrated catalogue was prepared in which the figures were reproduced in colour as being the *clou* of the Exhibition. The text accompanying the illustration included the following:

"These figures are admittedly the greatest examples of Chinese ceramic art the world has ever seen, and they have been put by a great connoisseur on the same plane of merit, in ceramics, as the celebrated Venus de Milo in statuary."

Well knowing that the "Malevolent Gods" were nothing of the kind, I could do nothing. I could only wonder at the courage, or rather, temerity of Gorer.

As it happened, the first Viscount Leverhulme (then Sir William H. Lever), had been present at the exhibition when Queen Mary made her unexpected visit. The great collector was quickly told that Her Majesty rather hoped this wonderful collection would be bought in its entirety by some public-

spirited person, with a view to presenting it to the nation. Whether or not this inspired Sir William, the fact remains that shortly afterwards he did buy the whole exhibit for about £250,000. The curious part about the deal was the strange contract which was drawn up between the "Soap King" and Edgar Gorer. Amongst other points, Sir William was to pay in monthly instalments of £30,000 till the whole amount was paid off, but he reserved the right to call the deal off, return the collection and get a refund of the money paid *should the fact of his having purchased it become public!* Doubtless he had reasons of his own for this strict secrecy, but it was a condition almost impossible of fulfilment.

This vast collection was sent to Port Sunlight and, of course, almost immediately the "secrecy" became purely nominal. Several people in Sir William's entourage referred guardedly to the "secret," and the late Mr. J. L. Tillotson, who was nephew to Sir William, and one of his chief Directors, told me openly of the whole transaction. He rather made fun of the elaborate precautions.

"Everyone at Sunlight knows all about it," he exclaimed.

That was said in the hearing of some of my employees and, naturally, this tit-bit soon got to the ears of old Jimmy Orrock, the dealer, who at once "de-bagged" the cat! To tell Jimmy a secret was equivalent to advertising it in the 'Agony Column'

of a daily paper. Trouble for Gorer started just about three months after the sale was completed. The bomb burst when Sir William demanded the cancellation of the contract and the return of the £60,000 or so he had already paid, because his secrecy clause had been broken! This looked to me rather odd, and the claim was so flimsy that I wondered if Sir William had heard anything about the unpleasant reputation of his "Malevolent Gods," which were the most costly pieces in the collection. Naturally, the whole London art world was agog with excitement and interest. I got my next shock when I happened to meet one of my cousins and asked him out to lunch.

"Well, Jack, what about the Richard Bennett collection now: what's going to happen, do you think?"

I murmured something about the gigantic values which had been put upon the "Ming Gods," whereat he smiled broadly and waved his hand in deprecation.

"Why?" I asked. "Don't you think they are worth so much? I thought you said you hadn't actually seen them."

"Oh, haven't I?" he exclaimed, leaning over the table towards me. "They were mine before Gorer bought them!"

"The devil they were! You don't mean to tell me you thought them as genuine?"

My cousin hesitated a moment and lowered his voice.

"For God's sake keep this under your hat, Jack, but they were offered to me by a man who certainly

ought to have known what he was talking about. Taking his word, I bought them unseen, but as soon as they arrived I saw I had blundered pretty badly. *I sold them at once, as purely speculative goods, for £200, and cut my losses!*"

Another instance of that "malevolent" influence! I wondered just what Sir William Lever and the art "connoisseurs" would say if they could have overheard our conversation! My cousin had certainly been extraordinarily wise to get rid immediately of such dangerous things. Perhaps, after all, Sir William *had* heard something, and hence the impending action for cancellation of the contract. Shortly after this, Edgar Gorer himself came to see me. He was obviously greatly worried, and came to the point at once.

"Jack, I'm told you are Lever's confidential expert. Is that so?" He hesitated a moment, and then: "Are you going to appear as expert witness in Court?"

"Certainly not," I replied earnestly. "Not if I can possibly help it."

"But I know for a fact that you *are* his expert."

"Well, I have a standing agreement with Lever, and have had for years. But it was agreed between us that the fact should remain entirely confidential."

Gorer took me by the arm in appealing fashion.

"Look, Jack: I'm fighting for my very life. You and I have often done big business together. Will you give me your word that Lever has not consulted you on the Bennett Collection?"

"Edgar, you know you have no possible right to ask me that question," I replied, "even if we have done big business in the past; but as a friend I'll tell you that I have *not* been consulted. What's more, if I am, I shall refuse to give an opinion."

Gorer wiped little beads of perspiration from his forehead: he appeared immensely relieved.

"Do you think I shall win?" he asked suddenly.

"Why do you ask me that?"

"You know the facts of the case between Lever and me."

That was true enough, but I wondered whether he was angling to find out whether I thought his "Gods" really were malevolent.

"If you ask my candid opinion, I'll give it you," I said. "But tell me first of all; apart from the contract itself, have you any real grounds for uneasiness?"

"No-o-o," he replied in a hesitating manner. "I have nothing to fear beyond the terms of the contract."

"Very well then, Edgar, my advice is—*settle at once!*"

"Why should I, if I'm in the right? Why must I lose my profits on a fair deal?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"You asked my opinion: you have got it. If you have the very least doubts, settle—even if you have to do so at the doors of the Court itself."

Of course, he did not take my advice. Or perhaps he did, but found in Sir William Lever too formidable

an opponent. At any rate, on the morning the case opened before Mr. (later Lord) Justice Darling, the Court was crowded with people, mostly Gorer's unfriendly competitors. At once there was a sensation when Gorer's Counsel announced that his client was perfectly willing to take the Richard Bennett Collection back: the only point at issue was the question of the sixty-odd thousand pounds Sir William had already paid on account. It seemed that Sir William objected to returning any part of the collection before he had been repaid in full. Gorer, somewhat naturally, protested that he had trusted Sir William for £250,000 and surely he, Gorer, could equally be trusted with £60,000 until sufficient items of the collection had been sold to liquidate the debt? This very reasonable attitude was upheld by Mr. Justice Darling, but Sir William appealed to a higher Court.

While Sir William still held the Bennett Collection, rumours reached London that the United States were going to re-impose heavy duties on old works of art, and everyone, myself included, regarded this Customs tariff as a practical certainty. Gorer now had to settle at all costs and, being a man of infinite resource, arranged with the "Soap King" that he should be allowed to choose certain articles from the collection at advantageous prices, and so liquidate the £60,000. Knowing both Lever and Gorer, there must have been some pretty shrewd bargaining, but I think I am right in saying that both men were pleased at their own astuteness!

So, at last, much of the Richard Bennett collection—including the "Malevolent Gods"—went across the "Herring Pond" in a hurry, and though a good deal was sold, those sinister figures could find no purchaser at all. Time after time their sale was frustrated for some reason or other, always at the very last moment. Certain it is that they were used as a weapon by jealous dealers in New York to "kill" some of poor Gorer's best sales. Later it came to open war between him and those dealers, and after one trip to England, Gorer had to go again to New York late in 1914 when sea voyages were beginning to become pretty risky.

Then, at last, things seemed to be going his way. Courageous as ever, before leaving London he had bought three fine Chinese vases from another dealer for £16,000, a price which certainly showed that Edgar firmly believed he was on to "a good thing." One of these vases was a large one, with the "imperial yellow" ground, and this he sold to one of America's wealthiest collectors for £40,000! certainly a very high price. Just at this stage, some doubt was thrown on the authenticity of the vase and my late Uncle Henry was called in to give an opinion. *Alas: with great reluctance, he declared it to be an imitation!* At once a heated controversy arose, but those unsaleable "Malevolent Gods" of ill-fame were used as an argument to prove that, after all, Gorer lacked sound judgment. The rich American returned the vase, and Gorer came back to England to collect evidence for a law-suit against Duveen Brothers.

Now we come to the last stage in this queer succession of unlucky incidents: the final tragedy. Edgar Gorer sailed for New York again in the *Lusitania*, as though to prove to the world that his indomitable pluck did not only apply to the making of money. On that evil morning of May 7th, 1915, life was granted only to the very few who could be got away in the lifeboats. Those with life-belts certainly had some chance of survival in the icy waves, but those without had practically none. After the fateful torpedo explosions, when the giant liner was slowly slipping beneath the surface, Gorer rushed out of his stateroom wearing a life-belt. A woman, half-demented with fear, clutched him by the arm.

"Help—save me!" she cried, echoing a hundred similar appeals of the victims of submarine warfare.

Instantly he unfastened his belt, strapped it upon her and pushed her down the sloping deck towards the water. Then he turned, remembering that there had been two belts in his cabin. Once more he rushed up on deck, only to find a Hungarian girl sobbing convulsively as she leaned against a stanchion. Gorer met her eyes, saw the mute appeal. She had no life-belt. Once more, without a thought for self he gave her his belt and a chance of life. The *Lusitania* was heeling over very quickly now; soon she would rear on end and slide down into the depths. As his fingers slipped the straps into place, Gorer made his last appeal.

"Would you"—he said to the trembling girl—"if you come through alive, would you go and see my wife—give her my everlasting love and devotion."

So this great-hearted London art dealer was sucked down in that whirling vortex which carried so many to their doom, another unsung hero amongst the millions who lost their lives in the war. Cold-blooded courage such as that, is given to true heroes alone. The Hungarian girl was saved, and a sorrowing widow and her young family in London took comfort and pride in one of the bravest acts I have known. Poor Edgar: a bold winner and a brave loser. I have known many a worse epitaph. The yellow vase, once sold in America for £40,000 still remains a worthless possession of the dead man's estate, for the dealer who sold it to him, afterwards repudiated all responsibility. What became of those truly "Malevolent Gods" I do not know. Certain it is that they brought ill-fortune to their possessors and, as I have said, had Gorer survived I believe that they would have completed their malignant spell by practically ruining him.

CHAPTER XX

SAVED BY THE CAMORRA

WHEN I recently heard the clear tones of the Marchese Imperiali, who broadcast from Rome in English and Italian an appreciation of the late King George V, I was instantly reminded of an affair in which I nearly lost my life some years ago. The adventure came to me in the way such things often do, in the guise of a letter from an old friend, Teunissen, so well known in Dutch art circles.

"Don't you think the time has come for our long-postponed holiday in Italy," he wrote. "To combine pleasure with profit, we can have a look at some fine Famille Rose vases I have located at Naples. There is also some very wonderful silver which is Royal property, and will involve a sea voyage!"

He concluded by warning me most solemnly not to let slip the tiniest hint about the trip, and this, more than anything, whetted my curiosity. We had long promised ourselves a quiet holiday, idling here and there under the Italian sun and so, without hesitation, I telegraphed Teunissen to meet me next day at noon on the station at Cologne. Failing that, we would rendezvous at the "Three Kings" Hotel at Basle. With a light heart I left London, hidden in a pall of January fog; but no sooner had we met

at Cologne and were seated having lunch in the dining-car that Teunissen gave me a shock.

"I particularly told you not to say a word to anyone about the vases or this silver," he said.

"Well, I haven't!" I replied, rather indignantly.

"H'm," he grunted, staring at me. "Something funny has happened already. That fellow, Baron Bratel, who used to be Secretary to the Valdonian Legation at the Hague, came to see me. Apparently he is now attached to his London Embassy, and I know for a fact he is very friendly indeed with George."

That gave me a shock. Mr. George, of Bond Street, was all too well known to me and others in the art dealing world as a bad man to cross, quite unscrupulous and the kind of person who would stop at little to get his own way.

"Baron Bratel explained that he had been staying with the Van Lindts at the Hague," continued Teunissen, "and though he was vague enough, I knew quite well he was angling for information about these Chinese vases. I came to the conclusion he must have heard something, either through you or their owner, the Marchese Imperiali himself."

"I tell you, I've not uttered one word about them!"

"Anyway," said Teunissen, "Bratel got precious little out of me. I telephoned the Marchese at once, and found that he has only mentioned the matter in confidence to his wife, the Marchesa, who inherited the vases from her father, Prince Ruffo di Calabria.

She wouldn't say anything. No, Duveen, that Bratel has made a lot of money out of George in the past: he wouldn't come all the way to the Hague for anyone else!"

We discussed the affair in some detail, and at last Teunissen began to tell me about the silver.

"It belongs to the King of Portugal," he said, "and when I was in Lisbon some years ago I was presented to Don Carlos, who gave me an invitation to look over the Royal collections. There were lots of wonderful things, but what impressed me most was an enormous Louis XV silver dinner-service. You know, Duveen, how rare that pre-Revolution French silver is: it took my breath away! The King was greatly pleased at my excitement, and he actually said: 'I shouldn't like to leave you alone with this for long, M. Teunissen!' We both laughed at the idea, and then I said: 'Such a treasure might turn any honest man into a thief, Your Majesty; but if at any time you feel that the responsibility of owning it is too much, I would greatly appreciate the chance of becoming its next owner!' 'That is a promise, M. Teunissen,' he replied. I forgot all about it, Duveen," said Teunissen, leaning over the luncheon-table, "but recently I received a cryptic message from the diplomat who introduced me to the King, hinting at a possible sale and mentioning the second week in February as a convenient date!"

"But, Teunissen," I exclaimed, "that set would literally be worth its weight in gold! Maybe as much as £100,000!"

"Much more like half-a-million," said my friend quite calmly. "The King told me it weighed nearly half-a-ton."

A rapid calculation told me that he had underestimated: the figure was nearer £600,000!

"I can't 'lift' a deal like that," I exclaimed.

"Don't worry. I'll fix the financial part with my bankers, provided that you will look after the selling."

This was going to be the most important deal in which I had ever taken part, and what with talking over details and our mutual interest in the wonderful Rhine country through which we were passing, the journey to Basle did not seem too long. Soon after arriving, we went to bed, but next morning Teunissen was late for breakfast. To my surprise he appeared, looking haggard and worn, as though he had scarcely slept at all.

"We are being followed—spied upon," he whispered, after the waiter had taken our orders. "Behave as though you don't suspect anything."

"How?" said I, knowing only too well that the most curious things do happen when a really big deal is being put through.

"I was robbed last night."

"Why not inform the manager?"

Teunissen waved an impatient hand.

"Too much explanation and delay. It would upset our plans. Besides, the fellow got nothing."

"Come on, tell me what happened," I said, exasperated by his manner.

"About midnight I woke up with a start—someone

had just gone out of my room, and as I always lock my door in hotels, he must have come from the balcony." Poor Teunissen wiped the perspiration from his forehead, and I could see that he was greatly upset. "My clothes were tumbled all over the floor, Duveen—no money gone—he had taken a small wallet in which I keep private letters. But there was nothing in that about our present affair, not even a business letter."

Quite plainly the object of the thief was not common robbery: he had been seeking certain information. And to whom could that be more necessary than the London dealer, Mr. George? It was quite on the cards that he hoped to forestall us on the purchase of the *Famille Rose* vases; or was it that magnificent silver which attracted him? I could not believe it was the latter, since the King of Portugal had treated the affair with the greatest secrecy, and Teunissen's letter to me had been very guarded indeed. In any case, whatever he knew or suspected, George was not the kind of man to "let up" until he had got what he wanted.

Teunissen was feeling none too well after his disturbed night, but the ensuing journey through the poisonous fumes of the St. Gothard Tunnel did not do him any good. What with the smoke and the high altitude, it was plain that we should have to spend the night at Milan. After a lot of argument we compromised on a few hours' rest: he did not look as if he could stand a whole night of train-travel. My forecast was correct, because although

we booked "sleepers" through the hotel *portier*, when it came to the point of departure my friend looked positively ghastly under the station lights. As we entered our brightly-lit "sleeper," Teunissen's face showed pallid.

"You are just not equal to this night journey," I told him. "You cannot afford a breakdown now: let's get out while there is time."

"Oh, don't bother me: I'm perfectly fit," he replied.

Acting on the impulse of the moment, I took hold of my bags and slung them on to the platform and, in spite of heated protestations, his followed.

"I'll never travel with you again," he snapped.

Even so, he followed me out of the carriage, and at that moment the train began to move. Teunissen's mouth had opened to say something else when, of a sudden, I saw him staring at the face of a man out-thrust from a carriage next to ours. He clutched my arm.

"Ha! I never thought of that. Did you see the rage on that fellow's face, Duveen? I'll bet he was my spy, the chap in my room last night! He didn't expect us to jump out at the last moment."

"Of course," I replied. "He probably found out our movements through the *portier*. Well, he'll have to go on now via Sarzana to Rome: in any case he cannot pick up our trail for a day or two."

To make the fellow's task doubly difficult, we took a tram, then a taxi and finally booked at the Hotel

de la Ville. After a night's rest Teunissen was more himself, but no sooner had we got to the station once more than we heard rumours of a terrible train-disaster. Officials were diplomatically vague, but a few minutes later from our carriage window we saw with our own eyes telescoped wreckage, shattered fragments of wood and iron and two engines lying on their sides, while gangs of men with cranes were working at feverish speed. Apparently the *direttismo* (express) we had left had very shortly afterwards run into a stationary "local," while a few minutes later the fast train from Genoa, running at speed to make up for lost time, crashed into the wreckage of the first two trains. It was officially stated that there were six dead and twenty injured, but my Italian travelling companions assured me that practically all the passengers in the first two trains had been casualties. From the way the great coaches had been upthrust, turned over and hurled from the track, I thought it more than probable.

"By God, Duveen—you saved our lives yesterday," exclaimed Teunissen, staring at the wreckage as we slowed to a four-mile-an-hour crawl. "Look—there is our sleeping-car—like matchwood!"

Quite a lot of our journey to Florence was taken up in speculating as to the fate of our "spy," and I fervently hoped that he would at least have sustained some fracture or other injury which would put him in hospital for the time being! Teunissen, the kindly, hoped he had escaped; but I was only too anxious

to reach Naples and get our important business over. Eventually we did arrive on 23rd January where, in the Hotel de Vesuve, we could overlook that lovely bay.

We had planned to leave for Lisbon on the 3rd February, which did not give us too much time for the delicate negotiations over our Chinese vases. On the 24th we called at the studio of a famous sculptor, a most charming fellow, who was conducting the sale for his friend, the Marchese Imperiali, and at first glance I saw that the porcelain was of a very fine type indeed. The vases were a set made in the Yung-Chin reign (1722-1736), and were decorated with battle scenes in the colours of *Famille Rose*.

"The price I am asking for my friend is 50,000 lire," explained the sculptor.

At £2,000 they were dirt-cheap, and I whispered as much to Teunissen. His reply was illuminating.

"I can't close at once," he muttered. "Haste would be fatal. Besides, if you give an Italian his first price, he thinks he is being 'had' and will haggle for more!"

That was true enough, and not only of Italians, either! I let him tackle the sculptor and, after an hour's conference, he told me that he had offered 40,000 lire (£1,600).

"I will write and tell the Marchese of M. Teunissen's offer," said the sculptor.

"Write?" I exclaimed. "Why not a telegram?"

"There is no hurry," said Teunissen.

"No?" I countered. "And what about our friend George in London?"

At that a wire was sent off and, with little delay, we received the one-word reply: "*Accept.*"

"See to it that you make the condition that the owner must deliver the vases *outside Italy*," I told Teunissen, whereat he nodded.

It was a particularly important point, because the Pacca Law stipulated that old works of art which are of national interest cannot be exported without a special permit, and even when this has been granted by one of the principal Museums there still remains an Export Duty to be paid which the Museum can fix at any rate from 20 to 100 per cent *ad valorem*. For this reason, wise foreign buyers leave these complicated negotiations to an Italian! In the present case we thought we had overcome most of the possible difficulties by leaving the onus on the seller. How very wrong we were was to be proved later on! The first sign of trouble was a hurried visit by the sculptor to our hotel.

"An English gentleman called to see the vases this afternoon," he told us. "He had a special introduction from a Neapolitan Duke and he wanted to buy. So interested was he, my friends, that when I refused to show the vases and said they were sold, he offered me as a present a silver cake-basket by your great silversmith, Paul Lamerie, and an additional ten per cent on your price, if I would call the deal off!"

As a matter of fact the sculptor, an Italian

gentleman of the finest type, felt greatly insulted; but his story threw a new light on the machinations of our friend, George, in London. If he was descending to barefaced bribery he must want those vases very badly indeed! Evidently, as his agent was now an Englishman, our Basle "spy" must be *hors de combat*. The sculptor, obviously worried, went into further explanations, hinting at difficulties of a peculiarly Italian type.

"I fear that we shall have to give a little something to one of the minor officials at the Museum," he said. "It will greatly facilitate the formalities."

I felt it time to intervene.

"Please remember that the Marchese Imperiali has undertaken to deliver the vases *outside* Italy. That was a specific condition of the sale."

"*Si, si, signor—naturalmente!*" he exclaimed with an inimitably Neapolitan gesture. "But this can only be done when the Marchese returns to Italy, since he can then take the vases out of the country as his own property. If you do not mind waiting a few months—no more than six or eight—it shall all be accomplished as arranged."

Eight months was about thirty-two weeks too long, but something in the sculptor's manner told me that nothing would move him from his point of vantage. After a few moments' discussion, Teunissen and I realised that in view of George's efforts to break our contract, it would be wiser to pay out some small sum and get the vases out of Italy as soon as possible.

"What amount had you in mind?" we asked.

"Ah!" replied the sculptor, "*una bagatella*—the merest trifle—a thousand lire."

Personally I did not think £40 so trifling, but we could scarcely argue with him at this juncture. Teunissen handed over a thousand-lire note and now, thought we, that solves the difficulty. Not a bit of it! During the next six or seven days all kinds of unexpected "snags" cropped up: indeed, if you did not have a close acquaintance with Italian ways you would not have credited such incidents. There were other officials "higher up" who were afflicted with "consciences": there were the special packers who inspected the cases to see that nothing else dutiable was included and these, when I rather demurred at a "little" *regalo* (tip) of 200 lire (£8), mentioned that sinister word *Camorra*! The way it was said sent a shiver down your back and your head over your shoulder to see who might be behind you. Knowing something of the country, I could quite imagine this South Italian secret society causing "an accident" to our precious vases. There was no help for it: the *regalo* was handed over, and this form of gentle blackmail was the beginning of quite a number of similar payments. The trouble was that the money was accepted with such gentlemanly airs and such indifference to filthy lucre that we could scarcely ask who actually were all the participators in our bounty!

Meanwhile time was slipping past and it was already the end of January: within three or four days we should have to take ship to Lisbon. That

Mr. George, of Bond Street, or his agents were not idle was proved by the fact that, one day when we went to have a look at Solfatara, the "sleeping volcano," my boxes and bags were most thoroughly searched! Whoever it was got nothing for his pains, but it did show us that until those vases were aboard-ship with us they might disappear at any moment. Teunissen was worrying himself ill, and even I felt the strain of nervous tension; added to which was the fact that Naples, where centuries of sordid and disgusting repression have resulted in an inborn hatred and contempt of the law, was not exactly a pleasant spot in which to be beset by unknown enemies. Both Teunissen and I suspected that our letters were being opened and read, and even he lost his temper when the hotel porter asked him by what ship we were leaving, since through "friends" (and a *regalo!*) he could obtain special accommodation for us. As we had not said one word about going anywhere by sea, the inference was plain. In fact, so many difficulties cropped up that even our sculptor friend began to mutter that too-familiar word, *Camorra!*

"The gentlemen must have a very wealthy enemy," was the way he put it and, knowing his own countrymen, he was probably right.

"Look!" I said to Teunissen, "let's come out into the open. Tell the shippers and the authorities that we want the vases sent by sea to London. It will put George and his spies off the scent if we say that we intend accompanying them to England."

We did so, but at that moment the whole of Naples was thrown into a turmoil by a stevedores' strike. Not a ship could be discharged or loaded: this was before Mussolini had managed to clean up the blackmailing strikes which were one of the great sources of income to the *Camorra*. No one could ever be prosecuted successfully, since the police were far too "friendly" with the chief offenders. The day after I had given orders to the forwarding agent for the shipment of the vases, he came to me and, with vast shruggings, explained that not a man or a crane was at work. Then I had a brain-wave.

"But suppose I gave a really handsome *regalo* to the sick-funds of the dock-workers? Would that help?"

A smile split his face: here was a foreigner who knew how things should be done! He departed in high humour, and the same afternoon returned with one of the most repulsive-looking men I have ever beheld. This "friend," Don Enrico, was short, powerfully built and with a face pock-marked by bluish scars. His smile was a leer, and it seemed to me unlikely that the hotel folk would have let him come in at all unless he held an important position in the *Camorra*. Expectorating freely on the carpet, he looked round at one or two good copies of bronzes from Pompeii and Herculaneum which stood in the Smoking-room.

"I have some beautiful originals like those," he exclaimed, jerking a thumb. "I get them before the Government steals them from the poor farmers who

unearth them. But I *pay*—yes, I pay handsomely! Now the signor wishes to give a few hundred lire to our funds for the advantage of having his valuable cases loaded, no?”

Though I hated to have dealings with such a man, I agreed that he was right.

“*Bene!* The gentleman will pay 1,000 lire for getting the cases aboard and another 1,000 for protection of himself and his friend. That is easy!”

Just another £80 or so by way of *regalo!* How I was beginning to loathe that word. It was useless to say that we did not need protection: the only thing was to pay and look pleasant. So the matter was settled and, having bade farewell to our sculptor, we were suddenly told that plans had been changed and we must embark at three o'clock next morning. On a thick night with a drizzle of rain we embarked silently in a large sailing boat: it was something of an adventure because the quays were in the hands of police and soldiery who had been called out to suppress the riotous stevedores.

“The strike will soon be over,” muttered the grim, pock-marked man who was now our guide. “The *carabinieri* mean business.”

“What are those?” I asked, pointing forward to where a big mound of sacking showed in the bows. “Our cases?”

“Yes, under the sacks,” came the muttered reply.

Don Enrico sat on a thwart while two men rowed us out into the harbour. Then, like shadows, I was suddenly aware of half a dozen other boats converging

on us. There came a gust of oaths and shouts which were answered by our guide and then, in an instant, we were in the midst of a first-class mêlée! Several men leaped from under the sacking in the bows and I saw oars, iron bars and heavy cudgels whirling in the air. Men cursed and fell overboard grappling with one another, while poor Teunissen and I crouched down and hoped for the best. Later I discovered we owed our escape to the foresight of our *Camorrist* who, expecting trouble from his unruly friends, had two other boats in reserve, to protect us. These, arriving at a timely moment, turned the battle in our favour and covered our retreat to the quays again. Ashore, police and military were running and shouting, and presently a couple of searchlights lit up the water, where men were still struggling in what seemed death-grapples. Teunissen and I scrambled ashore in undignified haste and on our heels came our *Camorrist*.

"*Bene!*" he gasped. "They sank two boats, but we sank four!"

He was as proud as an Admiral after a successful naval engagement!

"My God, that's the last time I have anything to do with the *Camorra!*" moaned poor Teunissen.

"When can our vases be got out?" I asked Don Enrico, pointing to the harbour where police launches were rounding up the late combatants.

"Ha-ha!" he roared. "They were on the steamer before you started!"

Back once more in our hotel, the night-porter handed Teunissen a telegram.

"*God Almachtig!*" he cried in Dutch. "Read this, my friend. It makes no sense!"

The message was cryptic, but to me was clear enough. "*Voyage inutile. Ami parti pour Queretaro.*" "Your journey useless: friend left for Queretaro." Teunissen stared at me.

"Left for Queretaro? Where the devil is that?"

"If it means what I think," I replied slowly, "it is plain that King Carlos is dead, shot! Don't you remember? Queretaro was where the rebel Mexicans shot their own Emperor, Maximilian of Austria. Your man in Lisbon put it like that to get it past the censor."

It was true enough, alas, and incidentally, the cowardly shooting of Don Carlos and his son put out of our reach for ever the opportunity of negotiating for that glorious Louis XV silver dinner-set. On the train northward to Milan next morning we read a full account of the murders in the paper. Without further adventure we came to the Hague and so, at last, to London, after what we had fondly hoped would be an "idling" holiday in the sunny South! Only much later did I discover the secret of George, the dealer's knowledge of our aims. He had suborned one of my employees, who supplied him with copies of my private correspondence, and that single clue—*Silver which is Royal property and will involve a sea voyage*—had been sufficient to set him on the scent. His Italian-Swiss "spy" had not

been much hurt in the train crash, but he sent an English agent with excellent credentials to follow us to Naples. It was he who, having influential friends, had set the *Camorra* against us, and, had it not been for our repulsive but extraordinarily useful Don Enrico, we should certainly not have got our vases out of the country.

Though bought at a "rock-bottom" figure which must have caused Mr. George real anguish, I had to keep them for five years before disposing of them at a very big profit; but after that chapter of accidents I certainly deserved it.

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